Jesus as Guru

The Image of Christ among Hindus and Christians in India



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– because inspiration knows no boundaries –

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Whoever explores the religion and culture of India comes face to face with a different world. From a Christian perspective, Hinduism seems, at first glance, to be a religion with beliefs and a spirituality that are very different from our Western variants. Indian culture as a whole seems to have little in common with Western culture. Art and science, morality and India's social structure have clearly developed differently from how they developed in Europe. Even the Christian faith in India is unique, strongly influenced by that different culture. India is a world apart.

The difference between European and Asian culture, of which India is the most striking example, can be articulated in various ways. The following lines from a nineteenth-century poem have become proverbial and are often cited to emphasize that we are dealing with two different worlds here, each of which is doomed to remain estranged from the other:

> Oh, East is East, and West is West,
> and never the twain shall meet.

But there is also something remarkable about this quotation. It does seem to exclude the possibility that "East" and "West" can come together, dividing humanity into two camps that have no points of contact. That is also how these lines are usually understood. But if we read these well-known lines in their context, it appears that the poet meant something else entirely: it is precisely contact, meeting and appreciation that he has in mind!

The quotation comes from a lengthy poem by the British writer Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936). Written in 1889, the poem is called "The Ballad of East and West."[1] The ballad has a martial-romantic character that will not appeal to many in our time but was quite popular in the nineteenth century. The poem tells

[1] Rudyard Kipling, *Rudyard Kipling's Verse: Definitive Edition* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1949), pp. 234-38.

the story of the confrontation between an Indian chieftain and brigand called Kamal and a young English soldier. Kamal has led an attack on the British fort and stolen the colonel's favorite horse. The colonel's son pursues him and sets off on a foolhardy ride across dangerous terrain, far outside the area under British control. Kamal is impressed by the courage and enthusiasm of the young soldier and spares his life. He also returns his father's horse to him and, moreover, entrusts his own son to him so that he can be enlisted in the colonial army.

This long narrative poem starts and concludes with a refrain that begins with the famous lines just cited, i.e. that East and West will never meet. But the lines that follow relativize this forceful beginning. Although East and West are situated in different places on the map and seem to represent two completely different worlds, God will ultimately bring them together at the end of history. And people can already anticipate that final meeting by stepping across the lines of division and meeting each other bravely and appreciatively:

> Oh, East is East, and West is West,
> and never the twain shall meet,
> Till Earth and Sky stand presently
> at God's great Judgment Seat;
> But there is neither East nor West,
> Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
> When two strong men stand face to face,
> though they come from the ends of the earth!

For me, this poem by Kipling has acquired a certain programmatic meaning. Apparently, it is worthwhile to search for what can connect people from different worlds with each other. Religions and cultures may differ greatly from one another and even seem to exclude one another at times. But in the end they will all prove to have their own place before God: opposites lose their absolute character *sub specie aeternitatis*. And it is clear that people from different worlds can often recognize and appreciate much in one another when they meet—even though I am not thinking here so much of the martial virtues that so occupied Kipling but of faith, inspiration and mysticism.

Kipling's poem teaches us, moreover, that texts require thorough study. Sometimes, at first glance, the text may yield a

certain meaning which, upon closer examination, appears to be completely wrong. Apparently, that can happen easily with an English poem of more than a hundred years old. How much more do we run that risk when reading texts from another culture. Carefully reconstructing what words meant in another context can also yield unexpected insights.

Our subject in this study is the image of Jesus Christ in India. People in India, both Hindus and Christians, form an image of Christ for themselves. It is only in that way that he can receive meaning in the context of their own culture. The "Western" image of Jesus, which took shape over several centuries of theological reflection and pious imagination in Europe, will, after all, always be strange to them. It is a divine form that comes from a different culture and is tailored to other people; it is the redeemer of others. And those "others" were the colonizers of India from Europe.

Of course, during the few centuries of Christian missions in India, there have been many who converted to the religion of the Europeans. But over the course of time almost all sought some connection between the proclamation of the Christian faith and their own background, the culture of their own country. And over against the converts, there are also numerous people in India who have remained faithful to their own religion and culture but nonetheless explored the meaning that this Christ could have for them.

Thus, an encounter between people from two different worlds occurred around the person of Jesus Christ. Since the beginning, missionaries had to account for the cultural and religious world they had entered. The question what the meaning of Christ could be in that world was inevitable. But Hindus were also challenged by the message Christians were proclaiming in their country. Although they wanted to continue to find direction for their lives in the religion of their forefathers, they had to determine their position with respect to the new proclamation that now confronted them. They could not escape the question as to the place Christ could have in their religious world.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century Jesus Christ has become a factor in Indian society. It was in his name that Western missionaries, and later Indian converts, resisted deeply

ingrained cultural phenomena like the caste system. And in church communities, however Western in intention, Indians made the Christian faith their own. But there are also Hindus who explore the doctrine of Christ and search for the relevance of the Gospel for their religion and their society. We can thus speak of an inculturation of the Christian faith in India. Since then, it is no longer possible to imagine Indian society and culture without Christ. But he has received a different face: it is no longer the European form of the Savior that the missionaries brought but that of an Eastern teacher who speaks to Indians. It is remarkable that it is Hindus who have played an important role in this naturalization of Christ. A modern Asian theologian observed: "Interestingly, the first persons to undertake serious theological reflection on Jesus from the perspective of Asia's religious traditions were not Asian Christians but Indian Hindus."[2]

In this study we will discuss Hindus and Christians from the last two centuries who have contributed to the development of Christology in India. They share a fascination with the figure of Jesus Christ but have very different views as to what he can mean in the Indian context. There are various ways to sketch an image of Jesus Christ, but at heart it always concerns a fertile encounter between Western preachers of the Gospel and adherents of Eastern religions, between Hindus and Christians, between European and Indian church members. The dialogue on the meaning of Christ appears to be able to set a great deal in motion. What that dialogue has produced in India can also be of great importance for the West. In any case, that is the conviction that lies at the foundation of this study. East and West have something to tell each other.

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[2] R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *Asian Faces of Jesus*, 4th ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 3.

CHAPTER 2

The Guide to Peace and Happiness

Rammohan Roy

The first time that the meaning of Jesus became the topic of public debate in India was at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The occasion was a small book on the teaching of Jesus called *The Guide to Peace and Happiness*, which was published at the beginning of the year 1820 in Kolkata (Calcutta). The work contained a large number of Jesus' sayings, carefully singled out from the New Testament and given an amenable introduction. The writer's name was not indicated, but for many in Kolkata there was no question as to who was behind this publication—it could not be anyone else but Rammohan Roy. The critiques of the book that quickly appeared attributed authorship to him, and he did not deny it. That meant that a Hindu, and not a Christian, had risked a publication on the Bible. That alone was the topic of much commentary.

A Scholarly Banker



Rammohan Roy (1772-1833) came from a prominent Hindu family that belonged to the priestly caste of the brahmans. Like many of the members of that caste, his forefathers had given up their priestly office for a career in management. But they continued to be very strict in the application of caste rules that had to guarantee their ritual purity. Rammohan's father was a highly placed civil servant under the prince of Bengal, the *nawab*, and the family also enjoyed a substantial income from their estate. As a boy, Rammohan was given the education appropriate to his status. He learned Persian first of all, which at that time was the language of the court and the civil service. For that purpose, he spent some time in Patna, a city where many Muslim scholars

had settled. He also learned Arabic there and acquired considerable knowledge of the Qur'an and other Islamic writings. He was subsequently sent for a time to Varanasi (Benares) for further education in this centre of Hindu religion and scholarship. Here he enlarged his knowledge of Sanskrit and studied the sacred books of the Hindus.

At the end of his life Rammohan would still enter the civil service, when he would be sent to London by the Moghul emperor Akbar II. At that time he also received the aristocratic title "Raja," by which he later became generally known.[1] But as yet the future Raja was a scholar and a banker, and one of the most colourful figures in the cultural elite of Kolkata. Already when he was sixteen, he had broken with the orthodox Hindu environment of the village where he had grown up. He wrote a pamphlet at the time in which he denounced the veneration of images in Hinduism and argued for a more rational, monotheistic form of religion. Unfortunately, this work from his youth has not been preserved, but we know about it from the fact that it led to a break with his father. A good relationship for the most part was restored years later and Rammohan was allowed a share in the real estate that his father divided among his sons. Rammohan Roy settled in Kolkata, where he fulfilled various secretarial functions for the British East India Company and its directors. He also made a fortune through moneylending to British traders and functionaries.

In addition to his successful commercial activities, Rammohan Roy occupied himself with the study of religion, publishing many works in different languages. His first important publication was written in Persian, with a foreword in Arabic, called *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin* ("A Present to the Believers in One God"). As the languages used already indicate, Rammohan Roy discusses the monotheism of the Muslims here. Central to this book is the idea that all people of whatever religious background have the natural tendency to turn to the one Divine Being. The numerous differences and contradictions between the different religions rested, therefore, not on nature but on convention and

[1] "Raja" was originally a hereditary title, translated as "king." But in the nineteenth century this title was devalued to a royal distinction bestowed on citizens of exceptional merit, comparable to a knighthood in England.

tradition. The focus in this natural religion is to see what is based on true knowledge and what rests on human tradition as far as religion is concerned. Confusing this human tradition with the true knowledge of God can only be bad. Rammohan Roy provides an illustration here: if someone consumes poison thinking it is candy, it will nevertheless have its usual effect and kill him. Rammohan Roy adds a prayer here: "O God, give me true power for making distinction between habit and nature."[2]

Even though it was flattering for Muslims to be praised by this Hindu for their monotheism, this book did not mean that Islam had gained a convert. Rammohan Roy had been impressed by Islam through his Islamic schooling in Patna, but he maintained a great distance from this religion as it had developed historically. He was interested in the religion *behind* the religions. He was looking for a religious truth that was universally valid, that could be traced via the revelations of the different religions. He addressed the Muslims with respect to that truth of the natural religion in their religion. But they were not his only intended readers.

Rammohan Roy was a Hindu and remained a Hindu. He demonstrated this, in particular, by studying the old Hindu literature and also publishing some of these sacred texts in Sanskrit and translating them into Bengali, the *lingua franca* of that area.[3] That was new—even, in a certain sense, revolutionary. The sacred texts in Sanskrit, the language of the priests were, after all, under the control of the brahmans and carefully protected from the lower castes. The publication of such texts was thus viewed negatively. Rammohan also wanted to look for the religion behind the religions in his own Hindu faith. And he wanted to publish the results of his search! He was looking for a concept of God that corresponded to nature and reason and offered the results of his research for the formation of public

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[2] Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, ed. Jogendra Chunder Ghose, vol. IV (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1982), p. 949 (the English translation of *Tuhfat al-Muwahhidin*).

[3] That the Bengali works by the Raja on Hinduism constitute his most important work is argued in particular by Bruce C. Robertson in his study *Raja Rammohan Ray: The Father of Modern India,* 2nd ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999). But he undervalues the importance of his works in Persian and English.

opinion. He was thinking in particular here of the urban elite in Kolkata, which, like him, was supposed to be open to a new reformed way of experiencing religion. As was to be expected, in addition to the appreciation for his work, there was also harsh criticism by the more conservative side of the brahman caste.

Rammohan opposed superstition and the external religiosity of his fellow believers vehemently. He was surprised that "Hinduism" seemed almost to be a synonym for "diet." High caste Hindus did indeed place great emphasis on ritual purity, which was maintained primarily by eating the right food. This was not just a matter of certain types of food but also of refusing food and drink that had been prepared or handed over by someone from a lower caste.

Over against this external religious practice, Rammohan Roy placed new emphasis on what he considered the heart of the religion of India. He did not find this in the popular mythological writings, such as the Puranas, and not at all in the ancient, dark sacrifice sayings found in the Vedas. For Rammohan the heart of Hinduism was found in the philosophical writings that concluded the period of the Vedas, the Vedanta, which included the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutra. Rammohan had published and translated some of these writings and commented on them. It was in this part of the sacred texts of Hinduism that he found the monotheistic concept of God. Indeed, Brahman is central to many of these books. In Rammohan's interpretation, this creative, divine principle behind all reality received the face of a God who could be worshipped—or better: the one God whom everyone must worship.

Rammohan agreed with the interpretation given by Shankara, the great eighth-century thinker who defended pure monism (*kevala advaita*): ultimate reality is one. The essence of the human being (*atman*) is the same as Brahman and all apparent difference is merely an illusion (*maya*). For Rammohan, the heart of the teaching in these old Hindu writings is the *advaita*: the individual could become part of the one ultimate reality. But he disagrees with Shankara on the practical consequences of this teaching. Shankara saw the break with the world as the highest form of religious practice: only those who withdrew from ordinary life and became hermits or monks would be able to experience ultimate truth in their own lives. Such an ascetic way of life was not at all positively received, of course, in the

beau monde of nineteenth-century Kolkata. Therefore, Rammohan Roy points to another way: the connection with the Supreme Being is to be experienced in one's existence in the ordinary world. To that end, a rational form of worship, without the worship of images or any other externalities, had to be developed. Religious belief had to lead to a moral attitude of service in society and tolerance for the adherents of all traditions.

Rammohan Roy also gave concrete form to this renewed worship. He founded a "Circle of Friends" (*Atmiya Sabha*), which met weekly for a new form of religious practice. Sacred texts were recited, religious songs were sung by a singer and the members also engaged in discussions with one another on religious and social issues. This closed society was later transformed into a society with its own temple, where everyone could attend services. This was the Brahmo Samaj (the Society of God's Worshippers), which still exists today. Although its teaching is clearly based on the Hindu tradition, albeit in a monotheistic form, the form of the service displays Christian influences.[4] That should not cause any surprise. Via his work for the British in the East India Company, Rammohan Roy had also come into contact with a number of Christian missionaries who were working in Kolkata and the surrounding area. He visited them at the mission post in Serampore but also sometimes at home and thus also attended home services sometimes. But it was in the area of social work, rather than spirituality, that he felt the greatest affinity with the missionaries.

A Social Activist

For Rammohan Roy, religion means not only worshipping the one God but also "doing good" in society. According to him, the teaching of the Vedanta did not call people to withdraw from society as the old ascetics did. Rather, belief in God included an activist attitude in the world. Whoever had risen above the ignorance and illusion of the world should also dedicate himself to spreading the truth and fighting against everything that restricted and subjugated the human spirit. And

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[4] Cf. J. Gonda, *De Indische godsdiensten* (The Hague: Servire, s.a.), p. 94: "A meeting on Saturday evening to read passages from the Upanishads, to listen to a sermon and to sing—this is Christian, not Indian."

there was, Rammohan Roy held, much to do. The degeneration of religion that had become visible in the worship of images had also led to abuses in the social area. He referred regularly in this context to superstition, inadequate education, poverty and the repression of women.

Rammohan therefore laboured with his Circle of Friends for the foundation of schools. This brought him into direct contact with the Christian missionaries in the area who were working on similar projects, even though they did not have a "Hindu College" in mind. Like the missionaries, Rammohan Roy also became active in the area of journalism. The first newspaper in the Indian language was begun by Baptist missionaries who had settled in the Danish colony of Serampore, twenty kilometres north of Kolkata. The English East India Company had initially forbidden the activities of missionaries in Kolkata itself. But the message of the Gospel reached Kolkata from Serampore by, among other things, this paper, *Samachar Darpan* (Mirror of the News). Following this example, Rammohan Roy began a Persian-language newspaper that was published weekly and a similar weekly in Bengali. He also made generous use of the possibilities that a journalist from one of the English language newspapers offered him to present his insights. Finally, he himself started publishing a periodical in English. But there was one area in which Rammohan Roy and the missionaries of Serampore were true allies. Rammohan supported them in the struggle against what he considered the worst excess of a wrongly understood Hinduism: the *sati*.

The term *sati* means "virtuous woman." But in India it is used particularly for the extreme act by which a woman would demonstrate her virtue after her husband's death. In traditional Hindu circles, it was seen as especially meritorious if, after the death of her husband, a woman chose to throw herself on the funeral pyre during the cremation. In some castes, which preferred burial to cremation, it also happened, with firm consistency, that the widow was buried alive with her husband's body. The notion of meritoriousness entailed that the woman herself had to choose this voluntarily. But there were examples of situations in which women were compelled to perform this "heroic" act through psychological pressure or even physical violence. In particular, in the higher castes, especially the brahmans, a widow was often treated insultingly and humiliatingly.

Many women thus had no other real choice after their husband's death than to throw themselves on the fire.

It is certainly true that *sati* was not universally practised in India. But it occurred regularly, also in Kolkata. In general, in this new urban society, there was the inclination among the higher castes to emphasize their Hindu identity by adhering strictly to the rules of ritual purity, and a widow who continued to live was an impure element in society. In the limited area of Kolkata and the surrounding region that was administered by the British a few hundred cases of *sati* per year were reported. The peak was reached in 1818 with 554 occurrences.[5] It was in that year precisely, however, that the protest movement really got off the ground—as a cooperative effort between Christian missionaries and reform-minded Hindus. Rammohan Roy published a brochure in which a fictional supporter of the practice engages in debate with an opponent, easily recognizable as Rammohan Roy himself.[6] He was also invited by the editors of the Bengali newspaper of the missionaries, *Samachar Darpan*, to expound on his view concerning this burning issue. The leader of the missionary post in Serampore, William Carey, had already established himself as a strong opponent of *sati* since the beginning of the nineteenth century. He had appealed to the British authorities a number of times, but in vain. The British officials thought little of missionary work anyway and certainly feared a decision that could provoke unrest in the Hindu community. The matter changed when debate on this issue started within the Hindu community as well because of Rammohan Roy's publications. It would take some years, but Governor General William Bentinck finally made the historical decision in 1829 to prohibit the burning of widows and to make it subject to punishment by law. William Carey, who also worked as a translator for the British, received a request early on a Sunday morning to translate it into Bengali. Apparently, he had some-

[5] M.C. Kotnala, *Raja Ram Mohun Roy and Indian Awakening* (New Delhi: Gitanjali Prakashan, 1975), pp. 52-53; see also p. 67.

[6] Rammohan Roy, *A Conference between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive*, in: *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. II, pp. 321-32. See also the works that follow in this volume of his collected works.

one else take over his church service and began work on the translation immediately in order to ensure that the decision would take effect immediately and that there would be no more victims. The story goes that it was the first time in his life that he was absent from church.

The burning of widows was prohibited, but the cruel practice did not disappear entirely from India. Right up until the present one still reads the occasional report of a case of *sati*. On 11 November 1999, in Mahoba Dt., for example, a desperate woman threw herself on the funeral pyre where her husband's body was burning. It is characteristic that the story of the protests by Rammohan and William Carey was immediately recalled in the publicity surrounding this event. In this context a leading Indian newspaper wrote about Rammohan: "The manner in which he fought sati showed how the zeal of the Christian missionary and the idealism of the Hindu reformer could be combined to strike at the roots of a social malaise."[7]

Rammohan Roy played a decisive role in the protest movement against *sati*. How precisely did it come about that he acted so decisively on this issue? It is fascinating to see how the myth around this event grew. In any case, it seems to be established that in 1811, when Rammohan's brother died, his wife threw herself into the cremation fire. Some writers describe glowingly how Rammohan was present and immediately became an avowed opponent of this practice. According to others, he received a letter telling him about the event—if he had been present, then he would certainly have saved his sister-in-law.[8] This is a nice example of how a later position can influence the image of the younger years of a great man. One writer who goes quite far in this portrays the young student Rammohan in Benares as an itinerant preacher who was constantly visiting the cremation places to keep people from attending these terrible events.[9] It is of course very possible that the death of his sister-in-law led to his abhorrence of this old practice. But it was years before he actually took any action. He first attempted to influ-

[7] A.J. Philip in *The Indian Express* (17 November 1999).

[8] Examples can be found in Kotnala, *Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, p. 26.

[9] B.N. Dasgupta, *The Life and Times of Rajah Rammohan Roy* (New Delhi: Ambika Publications, 1980), p. 93.

ence public opinion in other areas, such as in his struggle against worshipping idols and polytheism. But the experience that he acquired in public debate did come in very handy when he later began his fight against the burning of widows.

This takes us to what now was actually modern about Rammohan Roy and why he rightly deserves the honorary title "the father of modern India."[10] What was new was that he saw the importance of public opinion and attempted to instigate public debates on certain questions. For that purpose, he was in the right place in the Kolkata of the early nineteenth century. With the coming of the British, this negligible place grew into an important city. It was the capital of British administration and the place where a new urban elite of business people and intellectuals originated. Nowhere was there more contact between the Indians and the English as there. In the past eighteenth century a culture had grown up in England especially where public opinion became a factor in all areas, and the government had to take it duly into account.[11] Rammohan was sensitive to this and, with great creativity, brought important matters up for discussion in numerous brochures, pamphlets and newspaper articles. And he was successful many times in involving several in the formation of public ideas, of which the *sati* question is a good example. William Carey and his fellow missionaries had turned mainly directly to the government with requests to intervene. That was not how Rammohan did it. He expected little from governments as such—he wanted to change the opinion of the city population and only later did he turn directly to the government himself as well. That was when a group of traditional Hindus protested the decision to prohibit the practice. In response, Rammohan Roy, with a number of supporters, offered an address to the governor general and a petition to the Parliament in London. But Rammohan Roy's pri-

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[10] This is the subtitle of Robertson's book, *Raja Rammohan Roy* (cf. note 3). Rammohan Roy was repeatedly called this in India after Independence.

[11] A good description of this can be found in the classic study by Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, 6th ed. (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1974), especially pp. 76-87 ("Der Modellfall der englischen Entwicklung").

mary concern was to have his fellow believers see what reforms were needed in their tradition. Here he could work together with the Baptist missionaries in Serampore on the *sati* issue. But that was not always the case.

The Precepts of Jesus

In the beginning of 1820 Rammohan Roy published a modest book that would cause an enormous tumult. That is, at first glance, remarkable. After all, its content is not new or surprising at all: all it contained was a collection of Jesus' sayings, taken word for word from the standard English translation, the King James Version. The collection was preceded by an introduction, which recommended these texts as a simple but edifying instruction for religion and morality. The complete title of the publication was *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness. Extracted from the Books of the New Testament Ascribed to the Four Evangelists, with Translations into Sungscrit and Bengalee*.[12] It was published anonymously; no author's name is reported in the book. It is remarkable that the translations in Sanskrit and Bengali that are mentioned on the title page are missing: apparently, this was a pious intention for another edition.[13]

Already in February 1820, shortly after its publication, there was a sharp critique in *The Friend of India*, the English language periodical put out by the Baptist missionaries in Serampore. It was in this circle that the hard core of the resistance to Rammohan's book would be found and would continue for some years. It was Joshua Marshman in particular, the chief ed-

[12] Rammahan Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness. Extracted from the Books of the New Testament Ascribed to the Four Evangelists, with Translations into Sungscrit and Bengalee* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1820). See also Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, pp. 481-543.

[13] Only a few copies of the first printing have been preserved. The copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris that I consulted contains the English text only, IV plus 82 pages. The copy in the Bodleian Library in Oxford likewise has no translations in Indian languages. I am grateful to Dr. Gillian Evison for supplying me with information from this library.

itor of the periodical, who emerged as a fierce and uncompromising heretic hunter.[14] Rammohan Roy responded to the review in the Serampore periodical a short time later with an again anonymously published brochure called *An Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of "The Precepts of Jesus" by a Friend to Truth*.[15] The pseudonym he chose was a dig at the missionaries: a play on the title of the Christian periodical. Rammohan Roy seemed to be saying that one could better be a friend of Truth than a friend of India who did violence to the truth. Marshman again responded strongly in *The Friend of India* and Rammohan, now simply under his own name, wrote his *Second Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of "The Precepts of Jesus."*[16] When Marshman was again not convinced but rather hardened in his resistance, Rammohan Roy wrote his *Final Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of "The Precepts of Jesus."*[17] It was, in the meantime, 1823; Rammohan's writings in defence of his work became continually fatter and more scholarly and the gulf between the parties was permanently unbridgeable.

The discussion between Roy and Marshman has been described many times, and the apologetic writings of the former have received a great deal of attention.[18] In this battle of pens,

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[14] Dr. Joshua Marshman (1768-1837), a teacher, was one of three missionaries in Serampore. The others were the preacher and translator William Carey and the printer William Ward. They were called "the Serampore trio."

[15] Included in Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, pp. 545-64.

[16] Included in Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, pp. 565-675.

[17] Included in Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, pp. 677-874.

[18] Cf., e.g., M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Resistance* (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 1-37; S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974), pp. 19-41; Cromwell Crawford, "Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Attitude toward Christians and Christianity," in: A. Sharma, *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp. 16-65; Craig W. Livermore *et al.*, "Christology of Response," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 4 (1994): 5-31; R.S. Sugirtharajah, "The Indian Textual Mutiny of 1820," in: R.S.

there were some theological controversies with respect to Christology, in particular concerning the divinity of Jesus and the nature of the reconciliation, that were explored in depth. The *Final Appeal* especially, consisting of more than two hundred pages, is an impressive study, interspersed with exegetical notes on a number of biblical texts, complete with references to the Hebrew and Greek texts. It would already have been a major achievement for a Christian theologian to present such a thorough study—how much more so for an outsider, a Hindu. But this work takes us far from the original work, both with respect to subject and atmosphere, with which it all began, *The Precepts of Jesus*. What was the initial issue?

Rammohan Roy's primary intention with his booklet on the Gospel was to give his compatriots, both Hindus and Muslims, an idea of the teaching of Jesus. To underscore that intention, the English text had to be accompanied by translations in Sanskrit, the holy language of the priests, and Bengali, the language of the people. That did not happen with the first printing, but in the meantime Rammohan Roy went ahead with the English version. The educated Indians for whom he intended his work did, after all, know English. And Rammohan wanted, perhaps, to go beyond them to address the English people in Kolkata to show them that an outsider took an interest in their religion. Rammohan attempted to present the sayings of Jesus in his selection as objectively as possible to the people in India, having no other purpose than to show what Jesus had said. He did not interpret, let alone make any comparison with texts from other religions. He merely offered to his readers Jesus' sayings as such: take and read!

Rammohan Roy has, of course, a specific purpose in his choice of the Bible texts in question. He includes the one and excludes the other, something of which he is well aware. He gives his reasons for this choice in a short introduction of four pages. It is a personal, congenial work, in which we can clearly see what Rammohan Roy is doing. In order to persevere in life, he begins, a person needs two things. First, there is the under-

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Sugirtharajah, *Asian Biblical Hermeneutics and Postcolonialism: Contesting the Interpretations*, The Bible & Liberation Series (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), pp. 29-53. All other books on Rammohan Roy also contain descriptions of this remarkable public debate of course.

standing that there is a Creator and Preserver of the universe. That belief in God is passed on and taught to us, and we can also discover this by carefully studying the miracles of nature. The second thing that people need is the law, which teaches us to treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated. Rammohan writes concerning this that the law is partially present in all religions but principally taught by Christianity.[19] He was unable to discover earlier that this was the essence of Christianity because of all the doctrines with which Christians presented him. He understood from many that one could be called a Christian only if one believed in the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Others were more generous in his view and limited themselves to the requirement that one view the Bible as the revealed will of God. But, according to some, one could call oneself a Christian already if one intended to follow the teaching of Christ as he himself taught it. It is obviously in this last sense that Rammohan Roy wants to include himself among Christians. And thus he wants to present this teaching of Jesus. What the apostles all wanted to teach is not important in his view; he has looked at all the differences between texts in the New Testament letters and in Acts and concluded that they are not infallible.

Rammohan then declares that he was very hesitant to engage in discussion on religious issues with arguments. After all, people do not listen to arguments very well, even if they agreed with the natural laws and corresponded to what human reason and divine revelation prescribed. He thus clearly indicates what is decisive for him with respect to the knowledge of God: nature, reason and revelation supplementing one another. The influence of the Enlightenment that stamped the preceding century can be seen here. If this book does not make any argument, what does it do? He considers a simple listing of the purposes of the different religions to be more meaningful. Then everyone could decide for himself what was "the most consistent with

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[19] Rammohan Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus*, pp. I-II: "... although it is partially taught also in every system of religion with which I am acquainted, is principally inculcated by Christianity." Cf. *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, p. 483.

the sacred traditions, and most acceptable to common sense."[20] Rammohan Roy thus indicates that he does not want to look at Christianity in isolation. Here too he is concerned with the religion *behind* the religions, with religious insight that can be valuable for Hindus and Muslims as well because it is universally valid. And that means: not in conflict with other traditions and passing the test of reason.

That is how Rammohan presents the Gospel to Hindus and Muslims. He chooses deliberately for the *sayings* of Christ, for there everyone will gain something for his own life. He is less certain of this with respect to the narrative parts of the Gospel. The historical passages could easily invoke doubt and criticism by freethinkers and opponents of Christianity. The miracle stories in particular he does not want to present to his fellow countrymen. They would make little impression, for the Asians were accustomed to things that were much more miraculous in their own fabrications. Not without humour and self-mockery with respect to his own culture, he adds a footnote in which he refers to the myth of Agasti who swallowed up the ocean that had insulted him and then urinated all that water out again. It will be apparent from what follows below that not every Christian saw the humour in this.

Rammohan Roy wants to present Jesus' teaching:

> This simple code of Religion and morality is so admirably calculated to elevate men's ideas to high and liberal notions of one GOD ... and is also so well fitted to regulate the conduct of the human race in the discharge of their various duties to GOD, to themselves, and to Society, that I cannot but hope the best effects from its promulgation in the present form.[21]

After the short but very revealing introduction, the sayings of Jesus follow, extensively and without Rammohan interrupting the evangelists. The process is very simple: Rammohan Roy took his English Bible and simply started at the beginning of the

[20] Rammohan Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus*, p. III; *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, p. 484.

[21] Rammohan Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus*, p. IV; *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, p. 485.

New Testament with copying all the parts that contained Jesus' longer speeches. Such a process brings one first to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Things that Jesus said prior to that are obviously not included because they are simply disconnected texts in narratives, i.e. some texts in the story of his baptism, his temptation in the wilderness and his first appearance. The central text, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,"[22] is also left out because of this criterion.

In Rammohan's view, Jesus' real teaching begins with the Sermon on the Mount. This was not without significance for the reception of the message of the Gospel in India. It is known on the basis of various nineteenth-century converts that they became acquainted with Christian teaching through Rammohan Roy's book, and therefore the first thing they read was the Sermon on the Mount.[23] The Sermon on the Mount will also prove later to be the passage that was the most appealing to Hindus and has remained extraordinarily popular right up to the present. Rammohan's book certainly played a role in this.

After the Sermon on the Mount, Rammohan presents the rest of Jesus' sayings as found in the gospel of Matthew, skipping virtually nothing. The conversation with the disciples in Matthew 16 is included in its entirety, along with Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God," and Jesus' prediction of his suffering that follows. But the second and third predictions of his suffering are left out, as are some of the parallel passages in the other gospels. The writer does not want to emphasize the passion too much. It is very striking that the preceding and succeeding statements by Jesus in Matthew 20 are included, but the prediction of his passion is very deliberately excluded. That the conversation on the temple tax is omitted is certainly due to the miracle that is connected with it. And the speech on the last things (Matthew 24) is probably too far outside the experience of this Indian thinker to be appreciated by him. Thus, it is not included, whereas the three

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[22] In keeping with the translation that Rammohan Roy himself used, the quotations from the Bible here are from the King James Version.

[23] See M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 10-11. Nehemiah Goreh (see the following chapter) was also first moved by the Sermon on the Mount.

pericopes in Matthew 25 are, by way of concluding the first gospel. Thus the Matthew series ends with the judgement by the Son of Man, which will later prove to have great significance for Rammohan Roy.

Matthew takes up most of the publication since it, of the three synoptic gospels, contains the most sayings of Jesus. But Mark and Luke are also used carefully. After Matthew 25, Rammohan continues with Mark 3:31 and whatever of Jesus' sayings follow, the first of which is Jesus' saying about his relatives: "For whosoever shall do the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother"—a text that can sound positively shocking in India, because caste and family rules give a very different orientation. This part was also already included in the Matthew series. One would expect Rammohan to exclude parallels of texts that had already been listed, but that is not the case. Thus we find the parable of the sower three times as well as all discussions on eating with tax collectors and sinners. And that is significant! Those sayings of Jesus are in direct conflict with Hindu purity rituals, in which people of different castes do not eat together at all. In the same way the praise of the widow who gave her small gift and, in doing so, gave more than others, is always included. This would also be a striking text in India, certainly against the background of the *sati* issue.

He also works through the gospel of Luke systematically. It is remarkable here that one healing narrative is included as well, i.e. the healing of a man suffering from dropsy in Luke 14. This is certainly because it serves as the occasion for some remarks on the Sabbath that Rammohan includes every time: the issue of sacred times and associated taboos is very much part of his environment. It is strange that the closing of Luke 17 is missing. Of course, the apocalyptic report on the terrifying day that is coming would not have appealed to Rammohan, any more than the discourse on the last things. But this section does contain the text that would later play a central role in the dialogue between Hindus and Christians: "the kingdom of God is within you"(Luke 17:21).

After Rammohan Roy has completed his journey through the synoptic gospels, he does something remarkable: he includes only a few passages from the gospel of John. Sayings by Jesus that are very well known, such as his Good Shepherd speech, are not included. He chooses only the conversation with

Nicodemus from John 3, including the famous text: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son ...." From the conversation with the Samaritan woman he takes only a single text, but that one is exceptionally suited to his purpose, "But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth," and what follows. Rammohan considered himself and his Circle of Friends to be such true worshippers. He then chose the passage on the woman caught in adultery; it again appears that the improvement of the position of women was close to his heart. After the closing verses in John 9 on seeing truly, John 15:1-17 follows as the closing. This is undoubtedly a very deliberate choice. His presentation of the sayings of Jesus thus ends with the text: "These things I command you, that ye love one another." That, in Rammohan Roy's eyes, was the heart of the message.

Jesus as Guru

A certain image of Jesus emerges from *The Precepts of Jesus*, and it is that image that evoked such a strong rejection by the Baptist missionaries in Serampore. In a certain sense, that is somewhat surprising. This image of Jesus is not given sharp contours: Rammohan Roy does not indicate his opinion in his own words as to who Christ is. Stories about Jesus' life do not play any role and interpretations of what he said and did are lacking entirely. The only material that is used are Jesus' sayings according to the literal text of the gospels. Because Rammohan nevertheless became engaged in a fierce conflict, it is often suggested in later accounts that he did much more than simply present what Jesus said. We read that Rammohan, like Tatian in his *Diatessaron*, "integrated the Gospel narratives into a single narrative" and that it was Rammohan Roy rather than D.F. Strauss who did the first modern research into the gospels.[24] It is stated elsewhere that *The Precepts of Jesus* consists of "Roy's

[24] Thus Sugirtharajah, "The Indian Textual Mutiny of 1820," p. 33. In the second century Tatian wrote a "harmony of the gospels" in which the passages from the different gospels were combined with one another. David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), was the initiator of the Life-of-Jesus Research, in which the historical reliability of the gospels was a point of dispute.

own translation of the Gospels of the New Testament in which Roy ... uses the interpretive tool of translation to expound his view of Christ."[25] And more than one author would have us believe that Rammohan worked through the whole Bible in the original Hebrew and Greek.[26] Here as well the myth developed quickly. After all, it is not true, as can be observed by anyone who takes the trouble to read Rammohan's book. He did nothing else than take his English Bible and copy the passages where Jesus himself was speaking.

Nevertheless, Rammohan's method of choosing a selection from the Gospel does entail clear choices. And it is not strange at all that such choices meet with agreement by one and opposition by another. The image of Jesus that emerges from Rammohan's selection of Gospel texts is primarily that of Jesus as the teacher of wisdom: the reader constantly encounters a Jesus who gives instruction. Rammohan had primarily Indians in mind as his readers:[27] to them the figure of the teacher of wisdom was a very familiar one. The parallel with the Hindu guru who instructed a circle of students in true insight and the proper way of life is obvious.

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[25] Livermore *et al.*, "Christology of Response," p. 9.

[26] Crawford, "Raja Ram Mohan Roy's Attitude," p. 18. Similar statements can be found in Dasgupta, *The Life and Times of Raja Rammohun Roy*, p. 236.

[27] This is denied by Dermot Killingley. He states (*Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Traditions: The Teape Lectures 1990* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt & Grevatt, 1993), p. 141) that Rammohan was addressing his fellow Indians only in appearance; in actual fact, he was addressing Christians (and the missionaries in particular) "because an appeal to Hindus resting on Christian scriptures was contrary to his usual method, which was to present each tradition with arguments from its own scriptures, not from those of another." But the introduction to Rammohan's book does indicate as its purpose "the task of laying before my fellow-creatures the words of Christ" and he speaks about "people of different persuasions." In his first defense, he leaves no doubt that the book was intended for his fellow Indians—Muslims and Hindus—who were unacquainted with Christian teaching (e.g. p. 559). The announced translations of Jesus' sayings in Sanskrit and Bengali point in the same direction.

What one can learn form this guru is somewhat clear from the subtitle of Rammohan's book: *The Guide to Peace and Happiness*. The strong beginning with the Sermon on the Mount colours these words immediately—it is, after all, the Beatitudes that are quoted as Jesus' first instructions. Thus, at the very beginning is the promise of happiness to those for whom it is not at all obvious: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, etc. Corresponding sayings in the sacred texts of Islam and Hinduism are not easy to find. Jesus' instruction in this presentation would thus also stimulate the reader immediately.

The ethics of disposition in the long following section of the Sermon would be striking. It is not so much a matter of obeying commandments because they were traditionally formulated that way but more a matter of how a human being stands internally over against the other. It is not obedience to a formal rule such as "Do not kill," however justified it might be, that is primary. Rather, it is a question of having the right disposition towards the other in which all negative expressions, such as anger and cursing, are subject to criticism. Such a proclamation is remarkable in a culture that is strongly oriented to the observance of external rules for behaviour. That obtained somewhat for the Jewish world of Jesus' day but very much so for Rammohan Roy's India. The instruction in the Sermon on the Mount ends in the so-called golden rule: "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them." It is obvious from Rammohan's introduction that precisely this rule has special significance for him. And in his presentation Jesus emerges primarily as the teacher of humanity.

In the rest of Jesus' instruction, according to this selection, a strong accent also comes to lie on human motives and one's own responsibility over against the externality of following traditional rules. How this guide points to peace obviously has to do with breaking through the lines of division between groups of people. That is not only clear in the words that Jesus speaks but also in how he acts. Rammohan thus presents only briefly something of the narratives of Jesus' deeds, but what he does include is then given extra significance. A guru cannot be known only through his words; how he treats people is just as illustrative. That becomes clear in an evocative way when Jesus dines with tax collectors and sinners. It is certainly a shocking

image for the rigid caste society of early nineteenth-century India. That people from different groups in the population would eat together was taboo in all respects. Rammohan Roy was severely criticized by traditional Hindus for giving food to English people in his home—and he did not even eat with them!

The liberal attitude Jesus and his disciples had towards the Sabbath laws receives extra significance against the Indian background in which the holy is strongly demarcated from the profane, certainly in connection with sacred times. What is written about the position of women is also striking in this selection from the Gospel. Rammohan does not skip anything here, even including the passage from the gospel of John about the woman caught in adultery, which, for the rest, is only briefly represented. With the sections on widows, divorce and the anointing of Jesus, an image of the Lord arose that showed particular attention for women and ascribed to them their own dignity.

Jesus proved to be the teacher who shows those people the way to peace and happiness. With the Beatitudes as opening the work and the commandment to love one another as the conclusion, his instruction is characterized by humanity and solidarity. Jesus becomes known as a teacher of wisdom primarily in his words; these form the basis of every belief in which he is central. Rammohan's book seems to underscore that he can be taken at his word.

But a guru is also more than a human being who speaks wise words. It is classically Hindu to surround the teacher with divine honour.[28] The divine presence in the world is thus visible in the guru. The gospel texts in Rammohan's book that refer to Jesus as the Son of God are thus given a special nuance. In the later battle of pens it would become apparent that Rammohan did not attach any ontological significance to this, but Jesus was thus well placed to be seen as a true *gurudeva*, a divine guru.

God also comes up in Jesus' sayings, according to Rammohan Roy's selection. God is the one who intended life as a way to peace and happiness and gave his commandments to that

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[28] Taittiriya Upanishad I.11.2: "Be one to whom the teacher is a god." Cf. S. Radhakrishnan (ed. and transl.), *The Principal Upanishads* (London/New York: George Allen & Unwin/Humanities Press, 1974), p. 538.

end. In this He is very explicitly the one who does not exclude anyone and forgives anyone who repents. It is also clear with respect to God, even without the stories of Jesus' healing and liberating acts and his suffering, that He intends the good for people and is intent on saving them, despite the reality of sin and guilt. Jesus, the teacher of wisdom, shows people the way in which they can meet this gracious God. That is, of course, not the whole message of the Gospel, but, one would think, there is little that can be brought against it.

Entering the Field of Battle

Directly after Rammohan Roy's book appeared, the attack on him was opened in the English periodical of the Baptist missionaries in Serampore, with the—in this context—somewhat cynical title *The Friend of India*. One of the missionaries wrote a critical review, but it was primarily the chief editor of the periodical, Dr. Joshua Marshman, who expressed himself in an extremely negative way. He would continue the dispute with Rammohan Roy for three years.

Marshman (1768-1837) was responsible for education at the missions post. But he himself had received a considerably broader education than one would perhaps expect with a teacher. He was proficient in various Eastern languages, like Sanskrit, Bengali and even Chinese. He published translations of Confucius and his own Chinese grammar. But Marshman was not blessed with an open mind towards Asian culture. He had written in a pamphlet he published some years before:

> It is my opinion that to the very end of time, through their imbecility of character which Christianity itself will never remove, they will be dependent on some other nation; and happy will it be for them should Providence continue to keep them under the mild and fostering care of Great Britain.[29]

Rammohan Roy deserved a better opponent.

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[29] Cited in Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, p. 24 (from Marshman's pamphlet *Advantages of Christianity in Promoting the Establishment and Prosperity of the British Empire in India*).

Joshua Marshman opened the attack in his periodical by describing Rammohan as an intelligent heathen but one whose mind ran completely counter to the exalted incarnation of the Saviour. And he judged this heathen's book to be a danger, for it "could greatly injure the cause of truth."[30] But all this was sufficient for Rammohan Roy to begin a powerful counterattack. He did this in his first defense in which he took the guise of an anonymous outsider with the pseudonym "A Friend to Truth."[31] This allowed him to give an apparently objective critical reflection from the sidelines on the way in which "the Editor" deals with "the Compiler" (of the publicaton *The Precepts of Jesus*). With controlled indignation, he calls the public to a judgement on "the unchristianlike, as well as uncivil manner in which the Editor has adduced his objections to, by introducing personality, and applying the term of *heathen* to the Compiler."[32] The book had, after all, been published anonymously—how could Marshman then come to ascribe it to an "heathen"? The "Friend to Truth" explains at length that nothing else can be concluded from the text of the work than that the Compiler not only believes in one God but also in the truths that have been revealed in the Christian faith. Did the Editor have access to other information that allowed him to call the Compiler a heathen? Here the writer admits magnanimously that the Compiler is none other than the brahman Rammohan Roy—the chief Editor had guessed right!

But it is impossible to call such a person, who defends monotheism at the price of disturbed family relations and hate by his compatriots, a heathen. This is followed by an argument that was fatal for Marshman. It is understandable that such happens, given that Christians often see one another as heretics or something similar if they are not in agreement. But

[30] Cited by, among others, Dasgupta, *The Life and Times of Rajah Rammohan Roy*, p. 238.

[31] [Rammohun Roy], *An Appeal to the Christian Public in Defence of "The Precepts of Jesus" by a Friend to Truth*, in: *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, pp. 545-64.

[32] Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, p. 547.

> Very different conduct is inculcated in the Precepts of Jesus ... saying, "He that is not against us is on our part." Mark, ch. ix, ver. 40. The Compiler, having obviously in view at least one object in common with the Reviewer and Editor, that of procuring respect for the Precepts of Christ, might have reasonably expected more charity from professed teachers of his doctrine.[33]

Rammohan passes over the fact that the term "heathen" was also used by Christians for several centuries to refer to anyone who was not Jewish, Christian or Muslim without any negative implications.[34] But with his appeal to Jesus' own words, he provides a convincing argument. In his response, Marshman attempts to state that he had not meant it negatively, but from that point on he no longer writes about "an intelligent heathen" but about "an intelligent Hindu."

But their views with respect to content remained diametrically opposed. Marshman thought that Rammohan Roy did violence to the truth. What Marshman and his fellow missionaries missed is clear: the work of Christ, as interpreted in the doctrine of reconciliation, cannot be found in Rammohan's book. And that was precisely the central point in the missionary preaching of the Baptists: that peace with God could be found only through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is very understandable that the Baptists missed this central doctrine in Rammohan's work, but it is strange that their frustration on this point prevented them from seeing anything good at all in this book. Marshman writes that the sayings of Christ are useless without the doctrine of reconciliation. That gives Rammohan the opportunity to use the sayings of Christ to take aim time and time again at an open target. He quotes extensively, from more than one evangelist, the double command to love, as well as the golden rule, and he even printed the closing texts in capitals: "This is the law and the prophets" and "This do and thou

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[33] Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III, p. 549.

[34] This usage was maintained until far into the twentieth century. I saw it in a Dutch book for young people on Sadhu Sundar Singh from 1924. Cf. J. Schouten, *De jonge Leeuw van het Vijfstroomenland* (Arnhem: H. ten Brink, 1924).

shalt live." He adds: "Had any other doctrine been requisite to teach men the road to peace and happiness, Jesus could not have pronounced to the Lawyer, 'This do and THOU SHALT LIVE'."[35]

The question of the extent to which the words of Jesus are sufficient continued to influence the debate. The Baptists argued that the history of Jesus and the doctrines of the church were needed in any case to acquire forgiveness of sins and to receive the strength to obey God's commandments. This objection gave Rammohan Roy the opportunity again to quote extensively the sayings by Jesus he had published. He finds many texts in which it clearly appears that only sincere repentance results in forgiveness. The parable of the prodigal son is the most telling here. Rammohan now quotes for the first time from the Old Testament, namely Ezekiel 18:30: "Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin." Very emphatically, Rammohan then refers to the apocalyptic image of the judgement by the Son of Man in Matthew 25. The reigning Christ will confront the people with their deeds. What they have or have not done for the least among people, they have or have not done for Jesus: "For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat ..." (vv. 35ff.). Rammohan concluded that there were no other means to acquire eternal life than the fulfilment of our duty to God by obeying his commandments. He compares those who argue that dogmatic knowledge was necessary for salvation with those who say "Lord, Lord" instead of doing the will of his Father (cf. Matthew 7:21). Rammohan Roy ends up again at the Sermon on the Mount as the heart of Jesus' instruction: "the blessed and benign moral doctrines taught in the sermon on the mount," of which "the obedience to which is so absolutely commanded as indispensable and all-sufficient to those who desire to inherit eternal life" obtains.[36]

Another point of dispute was his rejection of the miracle stories and historical facts from Jesus' life, which Rammohan Roy discusses in his introduction. The Baptists held it against him that he considered the miracles insignificant and not very

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[35] Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, p. 551.

[36] Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, p. 555.

convincing for Indians. The supposedly comic example that Rammohan cited from Hindu mythology to show that nothing was too fantastic for the superstition of his compatriots had the opposite effect. Marshman trembled with righteous indignation when he describes to his readers how the miracles of Christ are compared here with the story of Agasti who swallows the ocean and then urinates it out again. The suggestion that the biographical parts of the Gospel would only invoke resistance on the part of opponents is also angrily rejected.[37] This is certainly not the strongest part of Rammohan Roy's approach. In his defensive writings he referred, not entirely incorrectly, to the conflicts that church history had produced precisely when dealing with the question of the interpretation of Jesus' life. And he referred, although somewhat highhandedly, to the little success that the missionaries had had with their version of the message of the Gospel until now: he could do better! There was something in that, but it cannot be denied that Rammohan is very one-sided in this respect. The rationalistic critique of the miracle stories, which originated in the preceding eighteenth century, played him quite false here. And leaving aside the passion narratives and all reference to the resurrection seriously limits his image of Jesus.

The debate continued for a few years, but the positions had already been assumed at the beginning and the debaters would not deviate from those positions. The publications became longer and denser; ultimately, Rammohan Roy and Marshman wrote works of more than 200 pages, in which they boxed each other's ears with Bible texts as in their previous writings without convincing the other. The doctrines of the Trinity and reconciliation proved to be able to lead to almost endless arguments. Rammohan won regularly on points: he explored the Hebrew and Greek concepts further and, together with his already earlier acquired phenomenal knowledge of different religions, he could present his case broadly and convincingly. Marshman continued to repeat orthodox statements that would certainly be recognized in an European context but would not find much reception among Indians. It is a shame that Marshman had enticed Rammohan Roy into a discussion that was

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[37] See Dasgupta, *The Life and Times of Rajah Rammohan Roy*, p. 240.

increasingly further removed from his first sympathetic attempt to present the precepts of Jesus to an Indian public.[38]

Although neither of the parties in the debate managed to convince the other, it did have an effect. This was so first of all on the individual level, which lead to a great commotion. Already in 1821, William Adam, a Baptist missionary in Kolkata, announced that he found Rammohan Roy's argument about the unbiblical nature of the doctrine of the Trinity increasingly convincing. He abandoned the Baptists and joined the small Unitarian community in Kolkata, leaving the mission centre in Serampore bewildered. William Ward, who, together with William Carey and Joshua Marshman, formed the Serampore trio, wrote sadly: "The heathen Ram Mohunroy converting a Missionary! How are we fallen! O Lord, help, or we perish!"[39] Somewhat more elegant critics called Adam "the second fallen Adam."[40]

A more general effect of the debate was that it became clear once and for all in Indian society how differently the meaning of Jesus could be perceived. The proclamation by the orthodox pietistic missionaries did not appear to be the only possible message of the Gospel. Undoubtedly, Rammohan Roy's book and the controversy that followed awoke interest in many for what Jesus had actually said himself. And that was why Rammohan Roy had published the book in the first place.

Oppositions

Various oppositions emerged from the debate about Jesus. First of all, there was the opposition between the Hindu who attempted sincerely to describe the message of Jesus on his own

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[38] I therefore disagree entirely with Sugirtharajah, who describes the debate in terms of colonial resistance. According to him, the colonized (Roy) engaged in battle with the imperialist ideology and he succeeded in defeating the invader (Marshman) with the latter's own weapons. That is the reason for the title of his article, alluding to the great mutiny against the colonial army in 1857, "The Indian Textual Mutiny of 1820." That Rammohan was victorious is not incorrect, but he did not start the dispute—the others did.

[39] Cited in Robertson, *Raja Rammohan Ray*, p. 40.

[40] Kotnala, *Raja Mohun Roy and Indian Awakening*, p. 95.

and the missionaries who also sincerely addressed a message of reconciliation through Jesus to the Indian people. These were two very different approaches to the Gospel, and the opposition between them can be seen repeatedly from the nineteenth century on in a number of situations. It is a difference in the direction of one's look, which leads to a entirely different form of belief. And seldom do people come to terms on the basis of these viewpoints. The difference between both is described in the history of theology as the "Religion of Christ" versus the "Christian religion."[41]

Rammohan Roy's interest was "the faith *of* Jesus," as that was expressed primarily in Jesus' sayings. The Baptist missionaries made "faith *in* Jesus" central: the conviction that human beings could be reconciled with God through Jesus as mediator. It is regrettable that the as such legitimate position of Marshman and his fellows did not allow any room for Rammohan Roy's intention and presentation of the message of the Gospel. The faith *of* Jesus, his preaching, parables and interpretation of the law did, after all, mean a great deal to Marshman as well. Because he did not recognize that, his message of faith *in* Jesus did not reach the other. Both positions are right in their own way. Rammohan presented Jesus correctly as a guru, and Marshman had just as much right to want to proclaim more than that about Jesus.

Others dealt more wisely with this opposition. A good example is the Anglican bishop of Kolkata, Reginald Heber (1783-1826). He arrived in India in 1823, when the controversy between Rammohan Roy and Joshua Marshman was at its height. He did not intervene in the Christological debate, but he did have a sermon at Pentecost in 1825 in which he referred very clearly to the issue. Among other things, he said:

> We rejoice that Christ is preached, even by those who hold not his faith in our own unity of fellowship .... We are content that the morality of the Gospel should be disseminated,

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[41] See, for example, H.M. Kuitert, *Jezus: Nalatenschap van het christendom. Schets voor een christologie* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1998), pp. 187-200.

> even by those who rob Christ of his godhead and mediatorial attributes.[42]

Aside from the opposition between the faith *of* Jesus and faith *in* Jesus, there is yet another opposition in the discussions on *The Precepts of Jesus*. Who actually has control of Jesus' legacy? For Marshman, it was unacceptable for a "heathen" to explore the Christian heritage on his own. In contrast, Rammohan Roy contested the monopoly that the missionaries thought they had on the message of the Gospel. He did that in an unexpected way that would have great influence in India right up to the present time.

In 1823 Rammohan was still wrapped up in another debate. He conducted a public exchange of letters on Christology with a certain Dr. R. Tytler, a doctor in Kolkata.[43] This battle of pens is not very interesting, because the tone is quite tense and the arguments from both sides are rather quick. But Rammohan, now under the pseudonym of Ram Doss, made a remark that began to lead its own life. Under the pseudonym "A Christian," Tytler made a pathetic appeal to his fellow Christians to honour their religion and in this context exclaimed: "... are you so far degraded by Asiatic effeminacy as ...."[44] Rammohan quoted this insulting expression and concluded:

> Before "A Christian" indulged in a tirade about persons being "degraded by *Asiatic* effeminacy" he should have recollected that almost all the ancient prophets and patriarchs venerated by Christians, nay even Jesus Christ himself, a Divine incarnation and the *founder* of the Christian Faith,

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[42] Cited by Dermot Killingley in "Rammohun Roy and Bishop Heber's View of the Trinity," in: Graham Harvey *et al.*, *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F.A. Sawyer* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 480-96.

[43] Later included in a collection by Rammohan Roy called *A Vindication of the Incarnation of the Deity*, now found in Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. IV, pp. 887-908.

[44] Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. IV, p. 904.

> were ASIATICS, so that if a Christian thinks it degrading to be born or to reside in *Asia*, he directly reflects upon them.[45]

Tytler's response was to be expected.

But it is important that Rammohan Roy here explicitly claims Jesus as a fellow Asian—probably for the first time in the history of India. And certainly not for the last time: it becomes a fixed element in the dialogue on Jesus in India. It is good to remember here how revolutionary this statement was at the time. Since the second half of the twentieth century, it has been argued emphatically that Jesus was a Jew and therefore not the "possession" of Europeans, Christian or not. But the situation was quite different at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Especially in England it was usual to see Jesus as belonging to that culture. Illustrative of this is the poem published by William Blake in 1804, which became very popular as a hymn in English churches, both in England itself and in the colonies. It begins with the words:

> And did those feet in ancient time
> Walk upon England's mountains green?
> And was the Holy Lamb of God
> On England's pleasant pastures seen?[46]

Against this background, it was all the more shocking that a Hindu presented Jesus as someone who was closer to him than to the Christian Europeans. One can object to the too easy identification that Rammohan Roy makes between Israelite and Indian: there is, after all, quite a bit of difference between the Ganges and Galilee.[47] But Rammohan correctly questions the obviousness with which Europeans see Jesus as one of their own.

Rammohan has, in any case, made one thing clear. From that point on it would need to be taken into account that, out-

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[45] Rammohun Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. IV, p. 906.

[46] William Blake's opening poem in his *Milton* cycle.

[47] These terms are borrowed from an article by Stanley J. Samartha, "Ganga and Galilee: Two Responses to Truth," in S.J. Samartha, *Courage for Dialogue* (Geneva: WCC, 1981), pp. 142-57.

side Europe, people would give shape to faith in Jesus in their own way. Rammohan Roy gave the first stimulus to this with his image of Jesus as a guru who can be taken at his word.

CHAPTER 3

From False Prophet To Demonstrable Divinity

Nehemiah Goreh



The message of the Gospel certainly did not remain unnoticed in India of the nineteenth century. Rammohan Roy did his part with respect to this in Kolkata, demanding that the cultural elite in the country pay attention to Jesus' teachings. The modern, liberal Hindus, such as those who met in the Brahmo Samaj, were once and for all convinced of the value of the Christian faith, at least insofar as it concerned the morality of the Gospel. But the Christian faith was also a topic of discussion and debate among Hindus in other circles as well. Missionaries from various denominations confronted Hindus in many parts of the country with the religion of the Europeans, the colonizers. As such, the subject of the proclamation was at least usually understood by the local population. The preaching of the Gospel also often incited strong resistance, which arose particularly when they penetrated into the heart of Hindu society, as in the city of Varanasi.

Characteristic of the resistance of the orthodox Hindus in Varanasi was the campaign that the young brahman Nilakantha Goreh carried out against the street preaching of the missionaries in his city. He entered into debate with the preachers orally and in writing, and showed himself to be a sharp and intelligent apologist for Hinduism. Nevertheless, the course his life took afterwards is exceptional. Goreh studied the Christian faith in order to be able to combat it but was increasingly impressed by the Bible and the teachings of the church and after a

few years abandoned Hinduism and was baptized. Nilakantha became Nehemiah and ultimately one of the most celebrated apologists for Christianity in India.

Nikalantha Goreh had a classical Hindu background. He came from a prominent brahmanic family in western India and his family had been associated for generations with the court of one of the local princes in Bundelkhand, the *nawab* of Banda. Nilakantha's grandfather also held a public office there as the prince's vizier. After a long career at the court, however, he settled with two of his sons in Varanasi, where they ran a guesthouse for pilgrims. Nilakantha was born in the rural area of western India, for his mother had, according to an old custom, retired to her parents' home before giving birth. He was born there, in the village of Kashipura (Hamirpur Dt.), on 8 February 1825. He grew up in the home of his father's family in Varanasi and was thus also stamped by life in the big city, in a multicultural society. Goreh's education was geared to his family's traditional way of life. The conservative brahmans were opposed to the schools the Europeans had founded. Even the prestigious Benares Sanskrit College would not do, because there too the European influence could make the students critical of their own religious teaching. Nilakantha was thus educated at one of the Sanskrit schools in the Hindu monasteries, of which there were many in Varanasi, and was also given private tutoring by brahmanic gurus. He became proficient in Sanskrit grammar, in the sacred texts and the various philosophical systems of Hinduism, and soon became known as a *pandit*, the title for a brahman who knows Sanskrit well. He later acquired the title of *shastri*, an expert in the wisdom and law books of Hinduism.[1]

The Goreh family were of old devotees of Shiva. The house where the whole family lived together in Varanasi also had its own temple for Mahadeva, or Shiva. But Nilakantha's father was a devotee of Vishnu, and Nilakantha also later chose Vish-

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[1] C.E. Gardner, Goreh's biographer, explains the titles for his British readers in his *Life of Father Goreh* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900), p. 24, not inappropriately as follows: "A shastri would correspond to our Doctor of Divinity, while a pandit would represent our Master of Arts."

nu as his personal divinity (*ishtadeva*), even though he had, following in his grandfather's steps, first been a devotee of Shiva. Such moves from Shaivism to Vaishnavism were rather rare but could be defended because both divinities were viewed as legitimately Hindu. The reasons for Nilakantha's move are also remarkable. He had done some careful research into the history of his religion, as is apparent from how he writes about it later himself.[2] He was struck by the fact that in the most authoritative and oldest sacred texts Vishnu, rather than Shiva, is central. And he discovered that the great Shankara and his immediate disciples were devotees of Vishnu and scarcely granted Shiva any space in their writings. To the young Nilakantha, the authority of scripture and tradition appeared to weigh heavily. This would turn out to be a fixed pattern in his further development, however much his views would change.

In 1844 Nilakantha Goreh engaged in public debate for the first time. The occasion was the work of Christian missionaries, who were preaching the Christian faith on the street. Like many other orthodox Hindus, Nilakantha considered such confrontational missionizing to be insulting, certainly when it was done in the holy city of the Hindus. This "bazaar preaching" was not without its detractors among Christians either. Liberal church members viewed this approach as too aggressive, and civil servants feared that it would produce instability in the native society. In contrast, missionaries of the evangelical persuasion, both within the Anglican Church and among the dissenters, found it to be a legitimate way of proclaiming the Gospel, which was, moreover, the most effective, precisely because of its confrontational character. Nilakantha witnessed William Smith at work, an Anglican missionary who had been sent to India by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), an organization associated with the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, the so-called "Low Church." Smith's preaching was, in good Calvinist fashion, fixated entirely on the contrast between eternal salvation and eternal rejection. The all-determinative influence of Calvin is recognizable right up to the terminology he used when

[2] In a letter to Sir Monier Monier-Williams, cited extensively by Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, pp. 35-36.

speaking of double predestination.[3] Smith made human misery central and interpreted it as a test to which God subjected the human being in his once-only earthly existence. Faith in Christ offered a way out of a completely depraved existence. Whoever accepts the Gospel's offer of salvation gains access to heavenly bliss, but inevitable punishment in hell awaits those who do not turn to Christ. Other religions are simply rejected: Hinduism is a means Satan uses to trap people.[4]

The nineteen-year-old Nilakantha Goreh took up the dispute with William Smith and his fellow missionaries on three levels. First, he visited Smith in order to convince him of what was absurd in his religion. To Nilakantha, it seemed meritorious to attempt to silence the missionaries.[5] He made his objections and immediately after his visit wrote a letter about them in which he articulated his critique once more. Smith answered him elaborately, stating in sharply antithetical way: "In your religion there is nothing but darkness before, and darkness behind, and doubt and fear in the middle; here light is *rained*, and peace and happiness forever and ever."[6] Such an approach did not convince the young brahman, of course. Smith did not want to reply to Nilakantha's arguments during their conversations but urged him to read the New Testament, of which he had given him a copy at their first meeting. Nilakantha had accepted it out of politeness but refused to read it.

Smith finally gave his brahman visitor another book, one that was impossible for him to leave unread. It was a work in very polished Sanskrit, containing an apology of Christianity in Indian style. It was called *Matapariksha*, i.e. "An Investigation into the Religions." The author was John Muir, a British civil

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[3] Thus William Smith, *Dwij: The Conversion of a Brahman to the Faith of Christ* (London: James Nisbet and Co., 1850), p. 72, writes that not all people among the European peoples will be saved: "perhaps not one in a hundred," a clear reflection of Calvin's famous *centesimus quisque*.

[4] Smith, *Dwij*, p. 45.

[5] Smith, *Dwij*, p. 37. See also Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, p. 38. "Meritorious"(*punya*) should be understood here in the religious sense: combatting the religion of the barbarians (*mleccha*) would produce a good karma.

[6] Smith, *Dwij*, pp. 42-43.

servant with an exceptional knowledge of Sanskrit, who was very sympathetic to the evangelical missionary movement.[7] Muir's long discourse in poetic form gave a number of arguments for the truth of the Christian faith that were worked out broadly. He presented in particular three criteria for determining whether a religion was true. First of all, a religion could be true only if the founder had the power to perform miracles. Second, the texts of a true religion are characterized by holiness and exaltedness (*shreshthata*). Third, only a true religion would be intended for all peoples and therefore be characterized by universality (*samanyata*). Muir then introduces several arguments to prove that only the Christian faith meets all three criteria of truth, whereas Hinduism does not have one.

Muir's book was very significant for Nilakantha Goreh's development. Later, when he wrote about his conversion to Christianity, Nilakantha said that the *Matapariksha* constituted his first acquaintance with the Christian faith.[8] At first he rejected Muir's argument with all his might and took the trouble to compose a reply, also in the form of a long poem in Sanskrit. This impressive work by Nilakantha is called *Shastratattvavinirnaya*, which means: "The Proof of the Truth of the Scripture." In this way he engages in the dispute with the Christian missionaries on the second level. Two brahmans had already previously written a refutation of Muir's *Matapariksha*,[9] but Nilakantha's work offered the sharpest condemnation of Muir's argument and the most radical rejection of the Christian faith.

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[7] John Muir (1810-1882) would later become famous for his extensive collection of classical Sanskrit writings, *Original Sanskrit Texts on the Origin and History of the People of India*, which was published in five parts between 1860 and 1872. *Matapariksha* was published for the first time in 1839.

[8] N. Goreh, *A Letter to the Brahmos From a Converted Brahman of Benares* [1867], 2nd ed. (Allahabad: North India Tract Society, 1868), p. 31.

[9] The controversy between Muir and the brahmans is described extensively in Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, Publications of the De Nobili Research Library VIII (Vienna: University of Vienna, 1981)

Nilakantha objects first of all to Muir's rationalistic approach, which apparently could judge religious systems on truth from the outside. In opposition to this, the young brahman postulates almost a Barthian approach to faith. The human being first has to subject himself by faith (*shraddha*) to religious truth and only then can reason (*tarka*) provide deeper insight into the doctrinal system. Nor, for that matter, is Nilakantha convinced by Muir's assessment as regards content. He rejects all three of the criteria for truth that Muir introduces for Christianity. Nilakantha states that he does not believe in the miracles that Jesus Christ is said to have done. If it was true that this incarnated divinity could heal the blind, why did the blind people who believed in him today remain blind? That would mean that something has changed with respect to God's compassion—which is impossible to imagine. Obviously, he also wants nothing to do with the alleged exaltedness of the Christian revelation. To the contrary, he boldly asserts that there is no passage in the Bible without discrepancies and other shortcomings. Incidentally, he also states his dislike of Christians because they kill animals, even cows. Any religion that does not include mercy for animals cannot be an exalted religion. Finally, in Nilakantha's approach nothing remained of the universality of the Christian faith. Here he reaches a climax in his fierce fight against Christianity. In his view, John Muir and all other Christian apologists have evaluated their own religion in an entirely wrong way. They could do nothing else, for their religion is to be characterized as a delusion (*mohadharma*). In Hindu thinking, this term refers to a belief that is held out to people in order to deceive them. Here it is a response by the divinity to the misdeeds done by humans: apparently, Christians were so bad in their previous lives that they must now live with such a delusion. It is their own fault that they have no reliable religion and cannot see that themselves! The Bible is no more than a deceitful work (*mohashastra*). And, in Nilakantha's view, Christ is a false prophet, the personification of deception. Nothing, therefore, needs to be said about him.[10]

[10] Young, *Resistant Hinduism*, p. 137, was astonished that Christ does not constitute a topic in this work: "Perhaps the most remarkable feature of Hindu apologetics within the Mataparikśha context is not so much

This work by Nilakantha Goreh in Sanskrit constitutes his dispute with the missionaries on an academic level. Its effect remained limited, however. It is not known if John Muir ever responded to the attack, but it is unlikely. In Varanasi, only a few scholarly Hindus studied the work. It was not published during his lifetime—not until 1951.[11] Nilakantha conducted his dispute with the missionaries on yet a third level. In addition to the scholarly Sanskrit poem, he also wrote a prose treatment in the language used by people everyday, Hindi.[12] The manuscript was more modestly called "Doubts about Christianity," and it was distributed by the author in Varanasi to arm Hindus against Christian preaching. In the first point of doubt we already find a reflection on the preaching of William Smith and his fellow missionaries. If people can be saved only through Christ, then it is incomprehensible that God has brought it about that so many people have no knowledge of him. In that case, God has created those countless people exclusively for hell. The second point of doubt is also directed at the heart of missionaries' proclamation: if Christ alone is the mediator, then God's love and grace is certainly limited. Moreover, it does not accord with God's justice that an innocent person should suffer for the guilty. The third point also concerns Jesus but is directed more at Muir's arguments. Nilakantha does not believe in miracle stories as a rule, thus neither in those allegedly done by Jesus. Moreover, the argument is not correct: if Christians do not wish to accept the miracles done by Hindus, why should the Hindus accept the miracles done by Christ? Nilakantha then defends Hinduism on a few points where Christians have misunderstood it. After all, they deny the law of karma and the transmigration of souls. They also reject the worship of images, but this is to be compared with the way in which they them-

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what it contained but what it lacked. A most curious absence is Jesus Christ, the figure at the very center of Christianity." In Nilakantha's case, this does not have to cause any astonishment: his approach excludes any substantial interest in the figure of Jesus Christ.

[11] *Shastratattvavinirnaya of Nilakantha*, ed. S.L. Katre (Ujjain: Scindia Oriental Institute in Ujjain, 1951).

[12] A summary of this never published work can be found in Smith, *Dwij*, pp. 58-70; see also Young, *Resistant Hinduism*, pp. 104-05.

selves give the Bible a separate status so that they can focus on the omnipresent God. Finally, Nilakantha takes up the figure of Krishna, who is often misunderstood by Christians. The stories of his amorous adventures with the shepherd girls are not intended to arouse lust but to transcend human passion. It is a sin to think that one is allowed to act just like Krishna.

There is a clear difference between the two works by Nilakantha Goreh against the missionaries. The argument in the Sanskrit poem is more a matter of principle and is stricter. He attempts primarily to argue against his opponents' starting points and, in doing so, dismisses their religion as a delusion whose content needs no further attention. He thus hardly discusses the figure of Christ, whereas the Hindi work does discuss Jesus Christ. The primary question now is if Jesus' work, particularly his reconciling suffering and death, can have the meaning that Christians ascribe to it. Nilakantha's response to that question is negative, but he expresses himself much less negatively. The difference between both writings had to do, of course, with the differences between the target audiences. The Sanskrit writing is intended for *pandits* and the author is therefore inclined to use arguments on a theoretical level. The Hindi work is intended for a more general public; he also offered William Smith a copy. In this work Goreh shows a more moderate side. Nevertheless, there is probably something else going on. Nilakantha Goreh has gradually begun to think differently about the faith of his opponents. After reading Muir's poem, he also began to study the Bible, probably to gain ammunition for the battle but also with growing interest. He said later that it was primarily the Sermon on the Mount that had appealed to him.[13] Jesus' teaching and example proved to be persuasive and would not let him be. Despite his initially very fundamental objections to Christianity, he began increasingly to wonder if it was not a matter of divine inspiration.

After having applied himself for almost a year to fighting the Christian faith in writing, he resumed his conversations with William Smith in the spring of 1845. He slowly became more and more acquainted with the Christian faith and after

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[13] From a conversational note by Sir Monier Monier-Williams, quoted by Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, p. 43.

three years was baptized. The commotion that his conversion to Christianity caused among Hindus is almost unimaginable. Hindus always found it difficult to deal with the phenomenon of abandoning one's faith, but here it was a brahman and a well-known scholar on top of that. The fact that he had shown himself in previous years to be an apologist for Hinduism made his conversion even more difficult. Nilakantha was expelled from his caste and was viewed from then on by his relatives as dead.[14] Characteristic of this indignation is the way in which his conversion would be still viewed by orthodox Hindus a century later. S.L. Katre wrote in the introduction to his publication of the *Shastratattvavinirnaya* that Smith used practical psychology to ease Nilakantha away from the environment in which he grew up: he hypnotized him with his friendly attitude and pleasant surroundings. According to Katre, the death of Nilakantha's wife, Lakshmibai, is also to be blamed on Christianity. She had been sick for a long time and was baptized two days before she died. Katre, without mentioning her illness, stated that her husband had her baptized against her will: "This forcible baptization ... so much shocked her that she did not survive it even by three days."[15] Lakshmibai's early death was, of course, given a very different interpretation by the missionaries: "It was a blessed thing thus to die in the freshness of baptismal grace."[16]

For Nilakantha himself, his baptism in 1848 was the beginning of an entirely different life, in a new environment and with new duties and challenges. A major symbol of this was his new name: from then on he called himself by his baptismal name, Nehemiah, even though he sometimes added his old Hindu

[14] This was done through *ghatasphota*, i.e. "the breaking of the pitcher". The socio-religious death of the guilty party was illustrated by knocking over a pitcher of water. See Manusmriti XI: 183-86: "A female slave should overturn a pot full of water with her foot, as if it were for a dead person"; This translation is taken from Wendy Doniger (transl.), *The Laws of Manu* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 269.

[15] S.L. Katre in his introduction to *Shastratattvavinirnaya*, p. XXV. Katre published Nilakantha's Hindu apology to counterbalance the use of Goreh's later work by Christian missionaries.

[16] Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, p. 87.

name for the sake of clarity.[17] He also continued to use the title *shastri* whenever it was useful to emphasize his status as a scholar.[18] It is remarkable that he was called *Pandit* Nehemiah in the initial period after his conversion.[19] As a convert who had an extensive knowledge of the Hindu religion and philosophy, he was particularly welcome among the Christian missionaries. In addition to the many illiterate, lower caste people who had become Christians there was now a man of academic status, whose qualities the missionaries used gratefully on many different fronts. From the beginning Nehemiah Goreh was asked to look after publications that could be of service to the spreading of the Christian message. His first project was a continuation of producing the Urdu *Book of Common Prayer* in Hindi, a task on which Smith had already begun. But his most influential book was *Shad-darshana-darpana*, a well thought-out study in Hindi on the six classical Hindu philosophical systems. It was translated quickly into English, whereby the neutral, typical Indian title *Mirror of the Six Schools* was replaced by a programmatic *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Systems*.[20] Although the book was intended expressly to show the superiority of the Christian faith, for decades it was the best introduction to the classical philosophy of India. *Pandit* Nehe-

[17] Nilakantha means "he whose throat is blue"; it is an epithet for Shiva—the Goreh family had traditionally belonged to the *Shaivas*.

[18] For example, on the title page of his most scholarly work: *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Systems* (Calcutta: Calcutta Christian Tract and Book Society 1862).

[19] Apparently, *pandit* was viewed at the time as an academic title and not as a religious one. That is different now. In 2002 when the Hindu priest Hans R. Bhagwandien in Rotterdam was baptized, he explicitly distanced himself from the title *pandit*. He signed a letter to me in which he announced his conversion as "pt H.R. Bhagwandien" and the "pt" was deliberately crossed out.

[20] The third edition of the English translation, which appeared after his death, was once again given the neutral title of the Hindi original: *A Mirror of the Hindu Philosophical Systems*, transl. Fitz-Edward Hall, 3rd ed. (London: The Christian Literature Society for India, 1911). The most recent edition, from 2003, once again has a more apologetic title: *A Christian Response to the Hindu Philosophical Systems*, ed. K.P. Aleaz (Kolkata (Calcutta): Punthi Pustak, 2003).

miah continued to work as a catechist and later as a pastor in missions, being recruited for very different tasks at different times. It was obvious that he, the brahman scholar, would be invited to accompany a young maharajah who had shortly before become a Christian on a trip to England. His background also made him the right person to spread the Gospel among the elite in Kolkata, the capital at that time. Later, as a preacher, he would also work in a settlement of *mahars*, who were viewed as "untouchable" in the caste system. That he, a brahman, was willing to look after this part of the population, gained him exceptional goodwill.

In the meantime, a change did occur in Nehemiah Goreh's career in the church. He was initially completely unaware of different traditions within Christianity. The Low Church tradition in the Anglican Church and the associated missions organization CMS had offered him his first acquaintance with church life. But about ten years after his baptism he began to study increasingly the views of the High Church tradition. As a Hindu as well, Goreh had been exceptionally sensitive to the authority of the age-old tradition: it was the most important factor in his move from Shaivism to Vaishnavism. Something similar happened here. With Smith and his circle Goreh missed the strictness of a church order and the authority of the tradition. Encounters with Anglo-Catholics and reading the books by their leader Edward Pusey opened up a new perspective for him. He experienced the Low Church people increasingly as people who made decisions in religious and ecclesiastical areas according to their own insights. The High Church people were much more firmly embedded in the church of all ages and regularly appealed to the authority of the old church fathers. Ultimately, Nehemiah Goreh saw the church as a mystical body, with its own value and authority, that existed independent of the individual members. In 1867 he left the CMS and sought to join High Church circles in Kolkata. The bishop saw to it that he could continue his career in a way that suited this change. He was quickly ordained as a deacon and later as a priest. He then became involved in the mission work of the High Church Anglicans, organized in the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG). But Goreh wanted to go a step further. Given that he had been a widower for some time now, he looked into the possibility of becoming a monk. A congregation for male monks

had been founded in 1866 for the first time in the Church of England. It was the Society of St. John the Evangelist, usually called the Cowley Fathers. Together with Nehemiah Goreh's instigation a few monks came to India to set up a community there. Goreh, of course, joined them as a novice. Indeed, he never did take vows because the cultural differences from the European monks were too great. But he did remain a member of this monastic community and, like the members who had taken vows, he was generally called "Father." Father Goreh died on 29 October 1895.

In his theological thinking, Nehemiah Goreh attempted continually to rationalize the choices he made. In the first period after his baptism, he was strongly influenced by the evangelical preaching of Smith and his fellow missionaries from the CMS. He wrestled, for example, with the doctrine of the eternal punishment of the sinner and even wrote a treatise on this issue of no less than 160 pages. But much more important was the way in which he presented the Christian faith in the religious context in India. Unlike the CMS missionaries, he studied seriously the philosophy and religious beliefs of his surroundings. But just like the missionaries, he saw the Christian faith as the only way to salvation. There is no trace of doubt in his works that everyone who was not a Christian should convert unconditionally to the true faith. When he found his place in High Church circles, he propounded the truth of Christianity as forcefully as possible and in any case more widely. The whole history of doctrine was present in the arguments: Scripture and tradition together formed the irrefutable proof of the divine origin of Christianity. It is a very narrow concept of truth that brought him to see one straight uninterrupted line from his own ecclesiastical position via the church fathers to the apostles and thus to activity of the Holy Spirit. He cites with approval the old church fathers on the one truth:

> Hear what S. Irenaeus, who was the disciple of S. Polycarp, who was the disciple of S. John, says of this tradition. "This preaching and this faith, the Church ... dispersed as she is in

> the whole world, keeps diligently, as though she dwelt but in one house."[21]

It is remarkable how Nehemiah Goreh presented this Christian truth to the Hindu world: making an all-out effort, he sought public debate, just as he had done previously against Christianity. His main work, in which he refutes the Hindu philosophical systems in a rational way, i.e. *Shad-darshana-darpana* or *A Rational Refutation of the Hindu Philosophical Schools*, is an impressive contribution to the dialogue with orthodox Hindus. Moreover, he also engaged in debate with modern Hindus who had left a great deal of the traditional ideas, rituals and way of life behind. He met them in the eastern part of India, particularly in Kolkata, in the Brahmo Samaj, the Society of the Worshippers of God, the monotheistic religious society founded by Rammohan Roy.[22] There was a similar organization in western India, particularly in Mumbai (Bombay) and Pune, called Prarthana Samaj, the Society of Prayer. Though small in terms of membership, both organizations played a prominent role in urban intellectual elite. Goreh addressed the adherents of the Brahmo Samaj in writing for the first time in 1867, with a work called *A Letter to the Brahmos form a Converted Brahman of Benares*. Four lectures were published in 1875, which he had held in these circles in Mumbai and Pune. But the most interesting work in this genre is a long exposition on the divinity of Christ, which Goreh wrote in the form of a letter. This letter was originally intended for Pandita Ramabai, who had become a Christian shortly before but, in Goreh's view, was too much inclined to let the generally religious prevail over orthodoxy. The book is called *Proofs of the Divinity of our Lord*.[23] He also adds in a long subtitle that he will also show that the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj are not alternatives for Christianity.

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[21] N. Goreh, *Proofs of the Divinity of our Lord Stated in A Letter to a Friend: In Which it also Shown that neither Brahmoism nor Prarthanasamajism can be Accepted as a Substitute for Christianity* (Bombay: Anglo-Vernacular Press, 1887), p. 41.

[22] See chapter 2 of this book.

[23] See note 21. I am indebted to Rick Hivner in Chennai who provided me with a photocopy of one of the few remaining copies of this rare work.

A certain image of Jesus surfaces in Goreh's writings after his conversion to Christianity. This is not the teacher of wisdom, which made such an impression on Rammohan Roy! Goreh distances himself very explicitly from any veneration for Jesus' teachings as was cultivated in the Brahmo Samaj. Goreh was also very much taken, in his first acquaintance with the Gospel, by Jesus' sayings, primarily as they can be found in the Sermon on the Mount. But, as he writes to the Brahmos, that was not any reason as such for him to become a Christian. More was needed to make him take the step that would break all ties to his family and cost him his respected position among the Hindus. It was the doctrine of eternal punishment that affected him so deeply that he had to make the choice and the necessary sacrifices. There was no place for this doctrine with the Brahmo Samaj, but "This very doctrine, I say, which you object to, and would banish away from religion, has proved for me the only source of life."[24] He opposed the adherents of the Brahmo Samaj very forcefully when they claimed that they had incorporated the essence of Christianity in accepting the morality of the Gospel. And then his dialogue partners had the temerity to remind him that he himself had been very much impressed at the start by Jesus' moral teaching. But for Goreh, that was not at all central to his faith and his work as a missionary. His concern was "to set forth the evidences of Christianity, to prove thereby that Christianity is a divine revelation."[25]

The terminology that Nehemiah Goreh uses here is certainly revealing. He appears to have adopted the same way of arguing that he earlier opposed as a Hindu. When he had seen the proofs listed in John Muir's writing for the divine origin of the Christian faith, he had strongly rejected this way of arguing. Rational arguments (*tarka*) could be valuable for penetrating a religious system but one must first entrust oneself in faith (*shradda*) to the truth. Now he does precisely the opposite: the Brahmos and, with them, the whole orthodox Hindu population, were to bow before the arguments that the church could produce for the truth of Christian doctrine. Even with respect to content his writings to the Brahmos were the mirror image of

[24] Goreh, *A Letter to the Brahmos*, pp. 52-53.

[25] Goreh, *A Letter to the Brahmos*, p. 35.

his earlier refutation of Muir's *Matapariksha*. Then he wanted nothing to do with Jesus' miracles; now he advances as an argument for the truth of Christianity that the miracle stories in the Gospel can be supported historically. Earlier he rejected the idea of the exaltedness of the biblical revelation; now he states that, of all sacred texts, only the Bible does not contain any shortcomings or exaggerations. Nothing remains of the Hindu writings and doctrines in his judgement—there is no concept of the holiness of God to be found in them. He cites the stories of Krishna and the shepherd girls as an example of "filthiest blasphemy."[26] Earlier, he had claimed emphatically that humans should not presume to judge Krishna. The Bible is certainly not a delusion any longer and Christ not a deceptive incarnation. To the contrary, the Christian faith is demonstrably the only revelation from God.

Here it concerns nothing less than a logical necessity.[27] With great shrewdness, he attempts to convince the Brahmos that it is precisely they as modern Hindus who should be more open to this. He gives his argument in a nice syllogism: 1. A human being cannot create a pure, perfect religion through his natural reason; 2. Brahmoism is a pure, perfect religion; 3. Brahmoism has originated in Christianity; therefore Christianity is a divine revelation. It is apparent here and elsewhere that Goreh sees the teaching of the Brahmo Samaj as the natural religion with which there is nothing wrong as such. Christianity also includes this natural religion as a component. But it is obvious that this natural religion must be supplemented by the special revelation of Christianity. And that takes us to Jesus Christ—not as the teacher of wisdom but as the second person of the Trinity who guarantees the truth.

Nehemiah Goreh was strongly influenced in his arguments by "evidential theology"as that had been developed at the end of the eighteenth century by William Paley. His major work, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity*, which was very popular at the time in Anglican circles, was a source of insight for Goreh. The idea that the truth could be proved fascinated him, and he went to all lengths to convince his compatriots of that. The high

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[26] Goreh, *A Letter to the Brahmos*, p. 5.

[27] Goreh, *A Letter to the Brahmos*, p. 45.

point of his later apologetic work is the book with the characteristic title *Proofs of the Divinity of Our Lord*. Here Goreh reveals himself as a traditional, orthodox theologian, who was also conscious of his place in Indian society. The many references from Scripture and tradition that he mentions are not that surprising. He ascribes great authority especially to the Athanasian Creed, but *The Book of Common Prayer* and other Anglican writings appear to have canonical status for him as well. Here too we find again his view that the adherents of the Brahmo Samaj (and the Prarthana Samaj) in fact offered nothing more than natural religion, traces of which can be found in all religions. That a certain pure "theism" has central place in their societies is due to Christianity. The presence of the church has, after all, driven them to think of something better than the indefensible religion of their ancestors. But now they had to take the step of accepting Christ as the God-man on earth. Goreh here used a nice Indian proverb to make clear to the Brahmos that rejection of Hinduism does not necessarily mean rejection of Christianity: "The foolish man whose tongue has been burnt by hot milk, blows upon the buttermilk (in order to cool it) before he drinks it."[28] It is precisely the Christian faith that now becomes meaningful in India where society is threatening to disintegrate because of the loss of Hinduism. A half-religion like that of the Brahmos has nothing to offer, and therefore Christianity must be accepted. That in itself is a matter of a healthy understanding.

Can Christianity find acceptance in India? The conclusion to Goreh's book includes the answer to that question. He assumes that Christ can be understood and accepted precisely in India because "a genuine Hindu is *prepared*, to some extent, to accept the doctrines of the Holy Trinity and of the incarnation."[29] The italicized word, "prepared," is telling: Goreh does indeed have in mind a *praeparatio evangelica* that is to be found in Hinduism. And here he is thinking of classical Hinduism and not the modern views of the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj, which display more of Western rationalism than of Eastern religiosity. The traditional Hindus possess a receptivity for the truly divine, that enables them, more than other peoples, to

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[28] Goreh, *Proofs of the Divinity of Our Lord*, p. 58.

[29] Goreh, *Proofs of the Divinity of Our Lord*, p. 72.

accept faith in Christ. Goreh certainly goes far when he writes: "Providence has certainly prepared *us*, the Hindus, to receive Christianity in a way in which, it seems to me, no other nation—excepting the Jews, of course,—has been prepared."[30] Here he mentions a number of aspects of Hinduism that are important in this connection. First of all is the call to complete devotion to God (*ananyabhakti*) found in Hindu sacred texts like the Bhagavad-Gita and Bhagavata Purana. And this is not the only thing, for the scriptures also call people to renunciation of the world (*vairagya*), to humility (*namrata*) and perseverance (*kshama*). Jesus' teaching connects with these values.

As a teacher, Jesus is therefore granted a place among the Hindus. But does he find a place as well as a divine form? Goreh emphasizes that the Hindus are familiar with the idea of the incarnation of God on earth, referring to Rama and Krishna who are considered to be descents of the divine (*avatara*). There are, of course, differences between the incarnation of God in Christ, complete with the doctrine of the two natures, and the various descents of Vishnu, but essentially the idea is the same in both religions. Hinduism also believes that in his grace God descended to the earth and suffered various humiliations to save human beings. It is characteristic that in this context he cites a classic Sanskrit text that extols the various descents of Vishnu: "If he had to distance himself from his manhood, if he had to descend to the lowest, if he even had to be become contemptible by begging—everything to save the world, then this has been shown by him, the Most High, by his own example."[31] A preparation for the Christian faith can also be found in the Hindu depiction of the Trimurti, a depiction in which the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are merged into one divine form. Thus, Hindus do not find it strange when they see Jesus Christ brought together with the Spirit and the Father into one divinity. Finally, Goreh mentions the Hindu feeling for ritual and worship. The worship service of the church reminds one of Hindu ritual and therefore appeals as a matter of course to

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[30] Goreh, *Proofs of the Divinity of Our Lord*, p. 72.

[31] Vallabhadeva, *The Subhashitavali of Vallabhadeva*, ed. P. Petersen, pt Durgaprasad, Bombay Sanskrit Series, XXI, 2nd ed. (Pune: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1961), v. 987.

Hindus. Reading between the lines, one can find here an argument for High Church Anglican liturgy. It is precisely in the exaltedness of the true worship service that the Hindu recognizes what the church in Christ is all about.

Goreh's attitude is clearly dated. The demonstrability of the Christian truth is a road that has been increasingly abandoned by theologians in and outside of India. In particular, the strongly rational, dogmatic approach with which Goreh advances the divinity of Christ will not appeal to many any more. In addition, the person of Nehemiah Goreh is not very recognizable any more. The brahman scholar who could move from extreme rejection to uncritical acceptance of Christian orthodoxy belongs to a foregone time. There is also a strong tragic side to the course Goreh's life took: he sacrificed everything that was dear and precious to him for the Gospel, but in the end he did not fit into the stiff British church culture either. The English lady who took care of him in the last phase of his life described him as "very saintly, but utterly joyless."[32] She is also the source of the sad remark that Father Goreh had prayed to God for 43 years for joy in his faith, but that prayer had gone unheard.

In his writings the strict ascetic Goreh often offers acute but rather dry theology. But we should not forget that he was one of the first Indian theological thinkers. He had no other examples than European theologians, and in the area that would later be known as interreligious dialogue there was nothing he could fall back on. In his work, however, we find a number of initiatives that would be worked out later by Indian theologians and could also be made extraordinarily fruitful. Nehemiah Goreh was a *shastri* and remained that. He had radically rejected the Hindu faith but did not do so superficially. He always discussed the questions of Hindu philosophy and religious tradition with depth. In the church he showed that it was actually worthwhile to study Hinduism seriously. With Rammohan Roy, he dared maintain, over against the very European church environment, that Jesus Christ was an Asian and thus

[32] Mrs. Henry Pope from Mazagon, cited extensively by Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, pp. 380-81.

could never be foreign to Asians.[33] In particular, in the book that he wrote for his fellow caste member Pandita Ramabai, he sought points of contact for the proclamation of Christianity in India. We find here all the themes that would be worked out later by theologians like Chakkarai and Appasamy: the *bhakti* as a typical Indian faith attitude, the *avataras* of Vishnu as comparable with the incarnation in Christ, as well as the feeling of the Hindus for ritual and worship.[34] Father Goreh also frequently argued that use should be made of monks in missions in India. His thesis was that only those who lived as religious would have access to the Hindus. His own way of life was adapted to that ideal. The great Indologist Max Müller lamented the fact that Goreh became "a Christian sannyasin."[35] Only in the twentieth-century ashram movement would it become clear how fruitfully the Hindu monastic ideal could be applied in the Christian church.[36] In the context of Hindu society, the most amazing thing finally is that a brahman like Goreh was able, through his Christian conviction, to distance himself so much from his caste background that he could even live in a community of "untouchable" *mahars*. It is from him that we have the saying: "Christianity with caste would be no Christianity at all."[37] Only in the last quarter of the twentieth century would that become a theme in *dalit* theology.[38] That Nehemiah Goreh was in many ways far ahead of his time also contributed to the tragedy of his life.

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[33] See R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 2nd rev. ed. (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), p. 55. Cf. chapter 2.

[34] See chapter 6.

[35] See Young, *Resistant Hinduism*, p. 171.

[36] See chapter 8.

[37] In Gardner, *Life of Father Goreh*, p. 7.

[38] See chapter 10.

CHAPTER 4

The Saviour of All

Pandita Ramabai

On my desk are four books from the beginning of the twentieth century, all of which have a Christian Indian woman as their subject: Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922). These books are in four different languages, French, German, Dutch and English, and each articulates a special appreciation for this woman. That is primarily visible in the subtitle (the title of all four books is simply: *Pandita Ramabai*). Thus, the French subtitle is: "The Mother of the Little Widows," while the German is: "The Mother of the Outcasts." The Dutch has no less than: "The Trailblazer for Lifting Up Hindu Women."[1] The English book seems more neutral—its subtitle is simply "The Story of Her Life"—but it is precisely this book that sings her praises most intensely. The introduction announces the story of her life as "a Record of Answered Prayers and Fulfilled Promises," complete with all these capitals.[2]

The four books have much more in common than just their subject. All were published by mission organizations or publishers associated with such organizations.[3] Ramabai was thus a well-known and celebrated figure in missions circles. It is also

[1] Respectively, Paul Buchenel, *Pandita Ramabai: La mère des petites veuves* (Lausanne: Secrétariat de la Mission Suisse aux Indes, s.a.); Nicol MacNicol, *Pandita Ramabai: Die Mutter der Ausgestoßenen*, transl. P. Baltzer (Stuttgart/Basel: Evang. Missionsverlag, 1930); N.J. Schelling, *Pandita Ramabai: Baanbreekster voor de opheffing der Hindoe-Vrouwen*, Lichtstralen op den akker der wereld 30/1 (Hoenderloo: Zendingsstudie-Raad, 1924).

[2] Helen S. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* (London: Morgan and Scott, s.a. [1900]), p. 5.

[3] The French, German and Dutch volumes were all published by missions organizations. Morgan and Scott, which published the English biography, hosted the office for *The Christian: A Weekly Record of Christian Life and Testimony, Evangelistic Effort, Missionary Enterprise, and Religious and Philanthropic Work throughout the World*.

very clear why that is so: a converted Hindu herself, she set up an impressive social relief programme for Hindu girls and women. She took in thousands in her day schools and boarding schools, and offered them an education. Most of these were girls who had no opportunity whatsoever to be educated, but she sometimes also took in children who had very little chance of survival. Many of her students also chose to become Christians because of their stay in these institutions. And in any case everyone who stayed in Ramabai's house saw idealistic energy and practical piety inspired by Christian faith.

Pandita Ramabai has had great significance for the spread of the Christian faith as well as for the image of the church in India. If Nehemiah Goreh was one of the first native Indian theologians, she was one of the first Indians to show the social face of the church. From the start, missions had gone hand in hand with emergency aid, medical care and schooling. But that was always a Western initiative, whereas Ramabai's social and educational work was completely Indian. The different institutions, based on Indian models, were her own idea and her initiative. And it was because of her great charisma that both Western donors and Indian colleagues could be mobilized.

Pandita Ramabai's influence extended much further than her social work inspired by Christianity. She worked at improving the lot of women in India in many ways. She attempted in numerous speeches to give her compatriots better insight into their own Hindu tradition and the consequences that could be drawn from that for the circumstances in which women lived. Most of her publications as well, in Marathi and English, articulated a plea for women in difficult circumstances. In particular, she worked on behalf of the high caste women who were confronted with a great deal of injustice and oppression. Thus, it is not only Christians in India who appreciate Pandita Ramabai. Contemporary feminists also refer to Ramabai's work, which already in the dark nineteenth century stood up so militantly for women's interests.[4] And official institutions honour

[4] For example, Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998). Ram Bapat strongly opposes the incorporation of Ramabai into the feminist struggle, given that she was concerned only with high-caste brahman women. He



her still today. Thus, a reprint of her most well-known book, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, written in 1887, was published in 1981 by order of the government of the state of Maharashtra. Pandita Ramabai's portrait is regularly seen in contemporary India—on, among other things, a 1989 postage stamp.

Ramabai was not a systematic theologian and did not want to be that at all. She viewed the differences of opinion in the Christian church and the debates in theology with some suspicion. She had not embraced faith in Christ in order to become entangled in a deeply divided Christianity that she encountered in both India and England. On the other hand, her writings witness to a very clear view of the meaning of Jesus Christ. That view has everything to do with the humanitarian work to which she had dedicated herself for so many decades. When she was almost fifty years old, she drew up the balance sheets of her life in the book *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*. That is the most important source for the knowledge of the course of her life and the development of her faith and thought. We should remember that this work was characterized by a certain one-sidedness. She viewed her life from the faith position she had reached after a long road across different borders: there was little room left for earlier motives and ideals. For that matter, it is that major development that makes her biography very enthralling. Her popularity can also be explained on the basis of this fascinating life story.

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sees Ramabai primarily as a revolutionary with respect to religion. That is correct, but the great influence that Ramabai exercised on the position of women (especially among the high caste women) should not be denied. Cf. Ram Bapat, "Pandita Ramabai: Faith and Reason in the Shadow of East and West," in Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds), *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi/London: Sage Publications, 1995), pp. 224-52. For Ramabai and feminism in India see also the introduction by Meera Kosambi in the most recent edition of her work *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words: Selected Works*, ed. Meera Kosambi (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

A Quest for Redemption

In her youth Ramabai was always on the road. She was the youngest child of a brahman couple who had lived for many years in a house they had built themselves in the jungle, far from society. In this isolated spot in the highlands of the Western Ghats (Karnataka) Ramabai Dongre was born in 1858.[5] Her home was an ashram where study and meditation were central and, however remote it was, many pilgrims managed to find their way there. According to the Hindu laws of hospitality, all of the pilgrims were welcomed, given lodging and fed. The income of the family, which came from leasing rice fields and coconut plantations was ultimately not sufficient to meet the costs engendered by this constant stream of visitors. When Ramabai was six months old, her parents thus decided to give up the ashram and to lead an itinerant life. They set off with their children, an older girl, a boy and the baby carried by a servant in a basket on her head, travelling by foot from pilgrimage site to pilgrimage site. At temples and at other holy places her father recited sections from the sacred texts in Sanskrit, for which his audience showed their appreciation with gifts of money or in kind. For sixteen years the family travelled through India in this way, and Ramabai thus experienced the most traditional side of Hindu society. The lack of women's rights especially affected her deeply. Her experiences in her youth would prove to be determinative for her later activities, and she would often refer to them in her writings.

Thus she tells her older sister's story with bitterness. In line with tradition, the girl was married off as a child. It was customary in brahmanic families that a girl be married between the ages of five and eleven and then go to live with her in-laws. In this case, however, a different arrangement was made. Ramabai's father had insisted that the young bridegroom stay with him so that he and the girl would receive a sound education. The parents of the boy had agreed, but when the marriage ceremony was over, they took their son with them to their own home again. Thirteen years later the bridegroom called on the family to claim his bride. The two "spouses" were totally alien-

[5] In the Gangamula Forest, on the border of what is now Chikmagalur District and Dakshina Kannada District.

ated from each other. The girl had developed into an intelligent, cultivated young woman, while the boy had ended up on the margins of society. Of course, the woman was not at all inclined to share her life with a beggar and her parents supported her in that. But to a number of orthodox members of the brahmanic community, it was regarded as scandalous that a woman would be unwilling to go with her husband. They collected money to sue in a British court. The court found for the husband , because the colonial government held that the traditional Hindu rules for conduct had to be respected. "Fortunately," Ramabai wrote of her sister, "she was soon released from this sorrowful world by cholera." And she adds, full of cynicism: "Whatever may be said of the epidemics that yearly assail our country, they are not unwelcome among the unfortunate women who are thus persecuted by social, religious, and State laws."[6]

And then there is the astonishing story of a man who gave his daughter in marriage to another pilgrim while on a pilgrimage. They met during the morning bath in the river. The father of the girl asked the other who he was and where he came from. After he learned that his conversation partner was a brahman like himself and that he was a widower, he offered him his nine-year-old daughter in marriage. They needed no more than an hour to come to an agreement and the marriage was concluded the following day. A day later the father left in a cheerful mood with the rest of his family, while his daughter was taken by a thirty-five-year old husband, whom she did not at all know, to a village fifteen hundred kilometres away.[7] Here Ram-

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[6] Pandita Ramabai, *The High-Caste Woman* [1887] (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888), p. 35; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Word*s, p. 156. She writes about "a near relative of mine." Dr. Rachel L. Bodley, who knew Ramabai well personally, confirms in her foreword to *The High-Caste Woman* that this concerned Ramabai's sister; see p. XVII. Cf. Padmini Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati: Her Life and Work. Pandita Ramabai Birth Centenary Memorial Volume* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1970), pp. 58-60.

[7] Ramabai, *The High-Caste Woman*, pp. 20-21; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 145.

abai was describing nothing other than the marriage of her own parents![8]

In this case things did not turn out badly for the nine-year-old bride, viewed within the framework of the culture. Ramabai describes her father as an orthodox reformer.[9] In principle, he adhered strictly to the rules of his caste, but he did have an unconventional ideal. He had seen his teacher provide instruction in Sanskrit to the princesses at the court of the princes in Pune. That was a very exceptional situation and was almost inconceivable outside the court since women were not considered capable of learning the priestly language and, moreover, it was considered inappropriate for women to concern themselves with the sacred texts. But Ramabai's father had resolved to follow his teacher's good example and to teach his own wife Sanskrit. He was not successful in achieving this ideal in his first marriage, but he tried again with his new young bride. And, indeed, this intelligent girl proved to be a good student, mastering the difficult sacred language in a few years and learning an important part of the mythological writings, the *Puranas*, by heart.

The actions of Ramabai's father here were so controversial that he had to account for them to the leaders of the religious group to which he belonged. By birth, he belonged to the monistic tradition of the Advaita Vedanta but had later joined the dualistic school of the devotees of Vishnu, which had been founded in the twelfth century by Madhva. He was therefore summoned to give a full explanation to the guru and *pandits* gathered in Udupi. He succeeded in defending his position via arguments derived from the sacred texts: the unconventional education could continue. The children that were born of the marriage were also initiated into the mysteries of the Sanskrit literature. In Ramabai's case, it was primarily her mother who taught her the language and the literature; her father was occupied with many pursuits and was limited in what he could do because of his advanced age.

[8] This is stated explicitly by Bodley; see Ramabai, *The High-Caste Woman*, p. XV.

[9] Pandita Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* [1907], 11th ed. (Kedgaon: Pandita Ramabai Mukti Mission, 1992), pp. 10-11.

What was it that the parents wanted to teach their children? Aside from Sanskrit grammar and vocabulary, both in verse, they also wanted to acquaint them with some of the classic Hindu writings. These certainly did not include the holy proverbs from the four Vedas, which were used in the cultus. Despite his enlightened ideals, Ramabai's father did not consider it proper to pass on these ancient divine texts, kept scrupulously secret by the priests, to women. But women could have access to more recent parts of the sacred texts, like the Bhagavad-Gita and the Bhagavata Purana. The latter especially was considered to be extremely important: Madhva himself had called it "the fifth Veda." Ramabai wrote later about it: "the Bhagavata Puran was supposed to contain all that was necessary for a child to learn."[10] Other material was thus ignored. Secular knowledge was suspect in this orthodox milieu, and contact with the Western world through learning English, for example, was absolutely forbidden. The religious Sanskrit tradition was everything. The goal was to learn the sacred texts by heart, and that was no small task: the Bhagavata Purana contained no less than eighteen thousand verses! Ramabai always highly esteemed her mother's Hindu instruction, even after her conversion to Christianity. Her first book in the English language, published in the United States in 1887, is dedicated to the memory of her mother "whose sweet influence and able instruction have been the light and guide of my life."[11]

The knowledge Ramabai thus acquired would be of great importance for her, but as yet she was confronted with the disadvantages of the exclusively religiously oriented existence of the brahmans. The most difficult period of her life began when she was sixteen years old. There was a famine and the family was under great duress because of their hardships. Manual labour lay completely outside the scope of their culture, and they could not earn their living through reciting sacred texts. On their terrible wanderings, in which the family sought to turn their fate around with severe asceticism, one after the other suc-

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[10] Cited in Nicol MacNicol, *Pandita Ramabai*, Builders of Modern India (Calcutta: Association Press, 1926), p. 12

[11] Ramabai, *The High-Caste Woman*, p. V; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 129.

cumbed. Within a few months Ramabai had lost both parents and her sister. Together with her brother she continued to travel the country, with the only skill she possessed for staying alive their means of sustenance: reciting the sacred texts.

After two years of wandering, the two arrived in Kolkata, then the capital of the British-Indian empire, where their star quickly ascended. The brahmans as well as the British scholars were impressed by this erudite duo, and especially by Ramabai. She received one invitation after another to display her remarkable knowledge of the Sanskrit tradition, which resulted in great accolades for her. After an examination by three eminent scholars, two English and one Indian, she was given the honorary title Sarasvati (the name of the goddess of wisdom). A short time later she was given the right to be the first woman to place the title *pandita*, the traditional designation for a brahmanic scholar, before her name. Her male fellow *pandits* saw her as having a special task: she was requested to give lectures to women in traditional circles who lived in *parda* (isolation). Higher caste women in orthodox circles never left the women's apartments of their homes and therefore led an exceptionally isolated existence. Ramabai was to instruct them on the rights and duties of women. And now for the first time she studied the *shastras*, the writings that contained the traditional laws and rules for conduct. This study made her still more aware of the predicament of women, precisely in the higher castes. Next to the practical application of the religious Sanskrit tradition, the language as such and the literary heritage continued to fascinate her. Illustrative of this is the Sanskrit Ode, an ode on and in Sanskrit that she wrote for an Indologists' congress in Berlin.[12] Her poem made a deep impression on this company of specialists and reinforced her reputation as the only female *pandit*.

In addition to fame and prosperity, she was also confronted in this period with severe hardship. Her brother died after a short illness and Ramabai had now lost all the members of her immediate family. Not long after her brother's death she married a well-to-do lawyer, Babu Bipin Beharidas Medhavi. They

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[12] Pandita Ramabai, *Sanskrit Ode: To the Congress at Berlin*, September 1881 by the Lady Pandit Ramabai of Silcar, Assam, with a translation by Sir Monier-Williams [1881], in: Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, pp. 340-47.

settled in the extreme eastern part of India, in Silchar (Assam). It was not in any way an obvious marriage, for Ramabai belonged to the highest caste, the brahmans, whereas her husband's caste could be traced back to the *shudras*. Marriage between people of these two castes (especially one between a brahmanic woman and a *shudra* man) was explicitly forbidden in the Hindu writings. But Ramabai had distanced herself somewhat in the meantime from her religious background. In Kolkata she had come into contact with the Brahmo Samaj, the Society of Worshippers of God, which had been founded by Raja Rammohan Roy at the beginning of the century,[13] and to which her husband also belonged. As was usual in these circles, they were not married according to Hindu rites but in civil court. In fact, the *pandita* was no longer at home in the world of the *pandits*. Because of the liberal urban environment that she had entered in Kolkata, she developed a new attitude to life in which traditional faith values decreased in importance. With respect to religion, she now subscribed to the monotheism of the Brahmo Samaj. For the first time she studied the philosophical Sanskrit literature, such as the Upanishads—the Indian heritage appeared to contain more than the devotional *puranas*.

It was also in Kolkata that Ramabai first encountered Christians. But this was going too far. She describes, not without some humour, how she experienced a prayer meeting at a Christian's home. For her, it was a completely strange world, due first of all to the European cultural pattern with which the Christian faith was inseparably bound at that time. For the *pandita* from the jungle, compatriots who acted like Europeans were a special point of interest. But she was also shocked when people offered her, a brahmanic woman, tea and cakes, for she had not renounced the rules for her caste concerning everyday purity. The Christians' prayer was a complete source of alienation. Those present kneeled in front of their chairs and spoke with their eyes closed. There was no image and it seemed to Ramabai that they worshipped the chairs before which they

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[13] See chapter 2.

were kneeling.[14] Even the Bible in Sanskrit, which was given to her as a gift, could not convert her: it was all too foreign.

This changed during her marriage. A Baptist missionary lived in Silchar and visited her several times. When he had explained the first chapter of Genesis to her, she was deeply moved by it. Ramabai was definitely searching: "I was desperately in need of some religion. The Hindu religion held out no hope for me; the Brahmo religion was not a very definite one. For it is nothing but what a man makes for himself."[15] The need for a trustworthy religion certainly did not decrease when Ramabai found herself alone again. After one and a half years of marriage, her husband died of cholera. A daughter had been born in the meantime and Ramabai had to build a new future with the little Manorama.

With her child Ramabai left the eastern part of the country and went again to western India where her roots lay. Her reputation had preceded her and in Pune, where she settled, she was given a warm reception by reform-minded Hindus. She was immediately given the opportunity to resume her old occupation: reciting the *puranas*. In addition, she gave lectures on the position of women, and founded a society for women that organized weekly lectures and discussions, the Arya Mahila Samaj. She made continually stronger arguments for reforms, for education for women and better health care, as well as for aid to the most vulnerable people of society, the widows. Ramabai was herself a widow and she knew from her own experience how widows were viewed with contempt. Popular belief held that it was as a consequence of bad deeds in the present or a previous life that a woman's husband died: it was her karma. Ramabai also heard the usual reproach that it was her fault that her husband had died. Sometimes the guilt was made even more precise: this is what happens when one marries outside one's caste.

Now, despite everything, Ramabai found herself in a privileged position because of her erudition and reputation. Other

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[14] Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, p. 17; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 301.

[15] Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, p. 23; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, pp. 305-06.

brahmanic women were certainly not that independent. In South India a higher caste girl would be handed over to her in-laws immediately after the wedding, which was sometimes performed when the brides were no older than preschool children. If the husband died, then the girl was a widow and had to suffer all the attendant consequences. This was so also if the girl had not yet reached puberty and had not experienced conjugal relations. The "virgin widows" had no future any more, usually remaining in service to their in-laws for the rest of their lives and occupying the lowest position in the household hierarchy. They were shaved bald and wore coarse clothing without jewelry, so that everyone would clearly see their status. The time of *sati*, the burning of widows, was past, but the position of widows, particularly the youngest group, was wretched at this time.

In Pune Ramabai took pity on a twelve-year-old widow. This child had been married when she was five, but her husband had died a few days after the wedding feast. The groom's mother accused the girl of "eating up" her son: she was a demon. The girl wandered for years through the streets of Pune until she came into contact with Ramabai and asked for help. Ramabai took her in and from that situation came the plan that would become Ramabai's life's work. She later wrote:

> As I looked on that little figure my vague thoughts about doing something for my sisters in similar conditions began to take shape .... I began to place a plan for starting a Home for Hindu widows before my countrymen and to ask for their help .... The unknown God, who was directing my steps toward the way of life, made it possible for me to carry out the purpose which He had put into my heart.[16]

It is apparent from this quote that Ramabai later connected the start of her social work with a new religious orientation. Her formulation of this is very much stamped by her sure Christian faith, with a strong charismatic slant, to which she later adhered. But it is a fact that in this year in Pune she took conscious initiatives to become acquainted with "the unknown

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[16] From an article published in 1907, cited by MacNicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (English version), p. 59; cf. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai*, p. 20. The term "the unknown God" is borrowed, of course, from Acts 17:23.

God." She studied the Bible, sought contact with English missionaries and Indian Christians, while learning English in order to understand the European world better. She was helped a great deal in this by the centre of an Anglican religious community in Pune, the so-called Wantage Sisters.[17] The contact with Nehemiah Goreh, who was working in Pune at the time, was also of great importance.[18] After all, he had the same background in Sanskrit scholarship as she did and, moreover, came from the same caste: they were both *chitpavan* brahmans. A member of the same caste, an eminent Sanskrit scholar, who had made the step to the Christian church more than thirty years earlier—it was self-evident that he would exercise an enormous power of attraction on the searching Ramabai.

Ramabai had lived in Pune scarcely a year when she dared to take the big step of travelling to England. For an orthodox Hindu, it was a sin to cross the ocean. Ramabai was no longer bound by this time by traditional Hindu teachings, but in her behaviour she was still largely faithful to the brahmanic culture. But she was convinced that only in Europe could she acquire the knowledge and skills that were necessary for what she saw as her life's task: relief for Hindu widows. She considered medical school first, but that did not appear to be realizable. But language study and some natural science could also prove important. Moreover, she now had the opportunity to find answers to her religious questions at the centre of the Christian world. She was hospitably received in the convent in Wantage. After a stay of half a year she decided to convert to Christianity. She was baptized, along with her daughter Manorama in the Anglican church in September 1883.

What had convinced Ramabai of the truth of the Christian faith? There were different factors. Acquaintance with life in the religious community in Wantage and her conversations with the sisters meant a great deal to her. She also became acquainted with the social side of church work. She was very much impressed by an excursion to a London branch of the sisters, where "fallen women" found relief. It was new to her

[17] Officially, the order is called: Community of St. Mary the Virgin; the headquarters were in the English village of Wantage.

[18] See chapter 3.

that religion could inspire people to show mercy to people who were in trouble because of wrong choices they had made. In her Hindu background, women who could be accused of being loose were treated with great contempt and harshness. In England not only did she see tender relief but she also learned how women could change because of such care and find new direction in life. The practical effects of Christan faith were the first factor that convinced Ramabai. Next, she became increasingly convinced of the truth of the Christian doctrines. It was Nehemiah Goreh's work on Christology, addressed to her in the form of a letter, that finally led her to embrace Christianity.[19]

Her stay in the West resulted in more than a definitive choice for the Christian faith. Ramabai took lessons in English and in the exact sciences at the Ladies College in Cheltenham, where she herself taught courses in Sanskrit. But a trip to North America was of more practical use for her future work in India than her stay in England. Ramabai was invited to attend the granting of a doctorate to a young woman from Pune who was finishing up medical school. It was a unique opportunity: she was the first Hindu woman in the world to have gained a doctorate in the field of medicine. Ramabai, who had wanted to study medicine herself, felt a great deal of affinity for this. But her stay in the United States would be very beneficial for her as well. Here—much more than in England—she found an eager audience for her plea for the improvement of the position of Hindu women. Her opposition to the oppression through centuries-old traditions found a connection with the American struggle for liberty. Moreover, from all sides she received practical and financial help. In two and a half years of travelling through the United States, from the east coast to the west, as well as Canada, she created backing that was sufficiently strong to guarantee the first ten years of relief for widows in India. She learned new skills, studying the education of pre-schoolers as developed by Fröbel. One of the fruits of her American period, furthermore, was the book *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, which

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[19] Nehemiah Goreh, *Proofs of the Divinity of our Lord Stated in A Letter to a Friend: In Which it also Shown that neither Brahmoism nor Prarthanasamajism can be Accepted as a Substitute for Christianity* (Bombay: Anglo-Vernacular Press, 1887); see the previous chapter.

was published in Philadelphia in 1887. In this book Ramabai poignantly describes the problems of her fellow caste women. Because of this many American women became involved in her project.

After Ramabai arrived again in India in February 1889, the home for young high-caste women was opened already in March. It began with a few students, but ultimately it would be able to accommodate seventy students. The home was initially in Mumbai, but after a few years Pune seemed to be a better location. It was called Sharada Sadan or "House of Wisdom." The name already shows that the accent was on education. Ramabai thought that precisely high-caste girls and women had the ability to study. By following a course of study, preferably to become a teacher, they could look after themselves and no longer be dependent on their in-laws. Moreover, a snowball effect could be expected: with their knowledge and experience, the teachers could teach other girls and convey better ideas about the position of women to them. Ramabai intentionally wanted to limit her work to the high-caste women, i.e. the brahmans. There were two reasons for this. First of all, the high-caste women suffered the most from oppression and humiliation; widows were treated more leniently in the lower castes. Second, Ramabai believed—certainly a caste bias—that high-caste women were more intelligent.[20] To interest brahman families in such an educational institution, the strict condition was laid down that its rules would correspond to caste rules. Ramabai thus guaranteed that, with respect to food, clothing and etiquette, the school would obviously follow what was prescribed for the higher castes. There was also the guarantee here that the students would have complete freedom to follow the beliefs and rituals of Hinduism. Christianity would not be propagated in any way whatsoever.

It was because of this strict neutrality that the project was primarily successful. At the same time it was also a position that gradually proved to be less tenable. Ramabai's charisma had its own effect on the students. She did not missionize at

[20] See Ramabai, *The High-Caste Woman*, pp. 60-64; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, pp. 174-78.



Sharada Sadan, but she lived among her students and easily let them share in her life. The story is well-known that she had devotions every morning with her daughter Manorama, during which the door to her apartment was open. An increasing number of students followed the Bible reading and the prayer on the veranda. Ultimately, a few entered and joined in. For most of her students, Ramabai was their salvation from a miserable existence. She undertook a great deal to get young widows whose lives were particularly difficult out of their situation and into the safe haven of her institution. Whenever reports of distressful cases reached her, she was not afraid to travel disguised as a lower-caste pilgrim to the place in question in order to get the girl away from the family in an underhanded way.[21] These actions led her students to ascribe to her almost supernatural properties. The drive to identify with such a figure, also in rituals and beliefs, became continually stronger.

In addition, Ramabai herself found it increasingly difficult to keep up the neutrality of her school that she had initially defended so passionately. Her religious search did not stop with her baptism. In 1891, eight years after her conversion to Christianity, she experienced another change in her spiritual development, brought about by a book by William Haslam (1818-1905).[22] This writer, an Anglican theologian, was one of the driving forces behind the revival movement that had been taking place in English churches since 1859.[23] Haslam placed great emphasis on the necessity of repentance and being born again. Following his example, Ramabai also decided to surrender uncon-

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[21] See the picture above of Ramabai disguised as a *mahar* woman, a very low-caste group.

[22] This was his *From Death into Life, or, Twenty Years of My Ministry*, which was published in 1880. This book is still popular in evangelical circles—it was reprinted in 1976 and 1994.

[23] See B.J. Poole-Connor, *Visitations of Grace: With Special Reference to the Revival of 1859* (London: British Evangelical Council, 1960).

ditionally to the Lord. The experience of being born again that she then underwent gave a new direction to her thinking about faith and missions. For her, it was now no longer possible to be neutral. After years of compromise and clashes with the Hindu members of her advisory body, it was finally decided in 1897 that Sharada Sadan would be a Christian institution that would offer elective education in the Christian religion. Freedom of religion was, of course, guaranteed for those who wanted to remain Hindu.

There was a departure from the original plan in another area. A major famine broke out in 1896 in the middle of the Indian subcontinent, the Central Provinces. Ramabai travelled to the disaster area to save three hundred girls and women. The criterion here for admission was not membership in a high caste. Caste boundaries lost any meaning in the terrible circumstances she encountered there. Characteristic is her story that she was approached by two girls about eight years old who had been threatened by a wolf. The one girl was brahmanic and the other came from the impure caste of the leather workers, the *chamars*. These two represented almost the extremes in the caste hierarchy. Naturally, Ramabai took pity on both of them and founded a reception centre for the victims of the famine in Kedgaon, a village about fifty kilometres from Pune.[24] Many girls and women found refuge here in the course of the years and were given vocational training. It was a large institution —ultimately there was room for two thousand students. Ramabai called the centre Mukti Sadan or "House of Salvation," a name inspired by a biblical text: "you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise" (Isaiah 60:18).

The shift in Ramabai's faith is very visible in the names she gave her institutions: from House of Wisdom to House of Salvation. Wisdom, in which the Hindu tradition could also share, was no longer central but it now revolved entirely around the exclusive salvation in Jesus Christ. This shift to a Charismatic Christianity was accompanied by a choice for new partners in her work. If Ramabai had been oriented up to that point to the Anglican Church, even though she had a preference for the

[24] Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, p. 240. See also Bapat, "Pandita Ramabai," p. 247.

Charismatic movement of Haslam and others, now the Methodists entered the picture. A missionary from the United States, Minnie Abrams, came to work at Mukti and for many years had a strong influence on the spiritual life there. An American Methodist minister in Pune, W.W. Bruere, was the clergyman who was asked for several decades to lead church services and especially to baptize Mukti students.[25] Manorama, Ramabai's daughter, joined the Methodist church.

There is a certain radicalization to be perceived in the Charismatic experience of faith within Mukti Sadan. There were new revival movements at the beginning of the twentieth century: in Australia (1903) and in Wales (1904), to which Ramabai and the other residents at Mukti were strongly attracted. Ramabai even sent her daughter to Australia to size up the situation of the new religious zeal in person. In 1905, in her enthusiasm, Ramabai set up a prayer group around this great event. Ecstatic experiences began occurring at Mukti shortly thereafter. In prayer meetings that lasted hours people spoke in tongues and many rolled over the ground crying or broke out in hysterical laughter. There were reports of fire appearing. The biographies of Ramabai have quite a bit of difficulty with these ecstatic outbursts, to which Ramabai obviously presented no counterbalance but participated fully in them. The official memorial volume issued on her hundredth birthday also concludes: "That she was prone to fanaticism at this time cannot, I feel, be denied."[26]

Her scholarly abilities were also placed in service to the exclusive proclamation of the Christian faith in its orthodox Charismatic form. Already in the first years after her stay in the West, the *pandita* was busy translating the Bible. This was a matter of making the existing Marathi translation into a more readable translation in a more popular variant of this language.

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[25] Minnie F. Abrams (1859-1912) worked in India as a Methodist "deaconess-missionary" from 1887 up until her death. W.W. Bruere was a minister of the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Pune (Oldham Church) from 1894 on.

[26] Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, p. 288. Cf. MacNicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (English version), pp. 117-21, 125: "She passed through an experience which intensified and, perhaps we must say, narrowed her outlook."

But she was also busy at the same time with translating classic Hindu writings, like the Bhagavad-Gita, from Sanskrit into Marathi. After the revival in Mukti, however, every Hindu text, even Sanskrit as a language, became taboo. Nor could Ramabai be satisfied any more with the existing Marathi translation of the Bible. The religious terminology was derived partly from Sanskrit and she suspected that elements of Hinduism came with them. Moreover, she suspected that the British Bible society had come under the influence of the then modern Bible criticism. She wanted to avoid both pitfalls in a new translation: a traditional version of the Bible in a Marathi that was uncontaminated by Hindu idiom. Ramabai spent a great deal of her time during several years on this enormous enterprise. She studied Greek and also acquired some knowledge of Hebrew; moreover, she made use of the linguistic skills of Indians of Jewish ancestry, from the "Beni-Israel community." She completed her translation of the Bible shortly before her death in 1922.

Jesus in View

The development in Ramabai's faith emerges clearly in her life story: from traditional Hindu via the Brahmo Samaj to the broad Anglican tradition and finally continually more focused on a Charismatic/Evangelical experience of the Christian faith. It is interesting to discover via her writings how an image of Jesus— which took on continually clearer contours—took shape during that development. It is not easy to draw conclusions from her own autobiographical sketch *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure* concerning her views in earlier phases of her life, for this book was written after the revival in Mukti and thus bears all traces of that. She views her whole life from the perspective she acquired then about the guidance of the Lord who had brought her out of dark heathendom into the light. But that was not how she had experienced it in earlier phases.

Nonetheless, *A Testimony* does reveal what first fascinated her about the figure of Jesus Christ. After visiting a home for "fallen women" with the Wantage Sisters, she wondered what inspired Christians to take up this work. One of the sisters then read to her the story of Christ's encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4). What struck her in that story was that Christ did not reject the sinner but wanted to help her, and she was

also fascinated by the words about the true worship "in Spirit and in truth." This text was also of great significance to Rammohan Roy.[27] Ramabai reread the chapter and later wrote: "I realized, after reading the 4th Chapter of St. John's Gospel, that Christ was truly the Divine Saviour He claimed to be, and no one but He could transform and uplift the downtrodden womanhood of India, and of every land."[28] It is doubtful if Ramabai did indeed have such an orthodox view of the "Divine Saviour," but the second part of the sentence is certainly characteristic. She recognized that Christ's work did away with human barriers that excluded or discriminated against people. She read that and more in John's gospel: she saw the practical consequences of that in the social assistance provided by the Wantage Sisters. It is evident that her great involvement with oppressed women in India made her extremely sensitive to the stimulus provided by a religion to do justice and to offer help. A Hindu author also rightly concludes that Ramabai was attracted by the serving aspect of Christianity.[29]

In her view, Jesus was the one who broke through boundaries in unexpected ways. For her, it was literally a revelation that a son of God could turn to the least in society, including those who were despised by others because of their bad conduct. In addition, she was also struck by the universality of the Gospel, which could not be claimed by a specific people or class. That contrasted sharply with classical Hindu teaching, which placed India apart and within India gave each caste its own place in a hierarchical order of life. Shortly after her conversion, the *pandita* wrote:

> One can feel that the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ comes from the All-Father, who loves not one nation, not one class, or one caste, but hears in His heart every creature of His hand, it would be a blessed day for India, if her sons and daughters could see that. He is the revelation of the Father, the bright image of His goodness, which is His glory,

[27] See chapter 2.

[28] Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, p. 26; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 308.

[29] Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, p. 316.

> that He is able through His spirit to lift men up to God, and enable them so to sympathy with sorrow, no trampling upon the feelings of others, no persecution of the unfortunate, no breaking of hearts by unkindness, but true sympathy and love—readiness to suffer, if through suffering we may help others more, above all there is that utter trust in the love of God for ourselves and others, which is the joy of life.[30]

She wrote this in an Indian newspaper and it is also clear how much she experienced her discovery of the Christ's doctrine of universal salvation as a contrast with the religion of her compatriots.

Nevertheless, she did not reject her earlier religion completely during these years. To the contrary, she wanted to hold on to the good that Hinduism had produced. And she also attempted to honour Hinduism, over against the English among whom she regularly met with ignorance and rejection of her ancestral religion. While defending the Christian faith to Indian readers, she attempted to give English readers a better understanding of India's high civilization. Characteristic is an article in the journal of the College in Cheltenham, where she was a student and a teacher. Like Rammohan Roy, she objected to the designation "heathen" for a Hindu. And she portrayed Hinduism as a basis on which the Christian structure could be built—a characteristic example of Hindu faith as *praeparatio evangelica*! In her own words:

> Christ tells he came not to destroy but to fulfil—and God's method of work seems to be ever to build on the old foundation, keeping that which is good, and destroying only that which is evil, decaying, ready to perish.[31]

What Jesus says here, which forms the starting point, applies of course to the Mosaic Torah, of which not one jot or least stroke of the pen will disappear. But Ramabai, without any difficulty,

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[30] Pandita Ramabai in *The Times of India* (September, 1884), cited by Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, pp. 147-48.

[31] Pandita Ramabai, in *Cheltenham Ladies' College Magazine* (Spring, 1886), cited in Sengupta, *Pandita Ramabai Saraswati*, p. 149. The Bible quotation is from Matthew 5:17, the King James Version.

saw it as applying to the Hindu *dharma* as well. She asserted often that the old Hindu writings gave us wonderful commands to love, but the new covenant in Christ gave us the grace through which these principles could be put into action.[32]

Nonetheless, we should remember how great a step it was for a brahman, a *pandita* no less, to convert to Christianity. She struggled for a long time to come to a decision and, in her situation, it led to extreme tensions. Ramabai stayed in England together with her daughter and a friend who was also a brahmanic woman. This woman had such difficulty with Ramabai's moving toward the church that she once attempted to strangle her at night and, when that did not work, took her own life. The suicide of her travelling companion affected Ramabai so deeply that she went through a serious crisis, as a result of which her hearing was seriously affected, thus causing her to give up her initial plans to study medicine.[33] The background for this great tension lay in the expected rejection in India, where conversion was seen as betrayal and a scandal. But the British situation was a factor as well. The church, certainly the Anglican church, was so interwoven with English culture, that joining the church was tantamount in many respects to breaking with one's own background. Illustrative here is that it was considered necessary to give Ramabai a new Christian name when she was baptized. But this name, Mary, was so foreign that she never used it again later. It was with the greatest difficulty that she held on to those elements of the brahmanic way of life that were important to her. Thus, she continued to wear Indian clothing, was a strict vegetarian and refused all alcoholic beverages. And she had to struggle with the Wantage Sisters on all these points.

The Christian faith did have something to offer, however, that she did not find in her own religious tradition: the Gospel could mobilize people in India to bring about change. In an in-

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[32] See, e.g. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai*, p. 121. Cf. Ramabai, *The High-Caste Woman*, p. XXIII.

[33] Understandably, this story is left out of most books on Ramabai. The famous Indologist, F. Max Müller, with whom Ramabai stayed for a long time after the incident, did write about it. See Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, pp. 317-18.

terview with a newspaper in Chicago, she said about Christian missionaries:

> I hope some day we shall owe to their labours and their prayers a great army of Christian apostles among our people who will eventually regenerate the whole Hindu nation through their lives and their teachings.[34]

For her, therefore, it was a matter of the renewing power of the message of Christ, for he had turned to the suffering and oppressed with his proclamation of salvation and he cancelled all divisions between people, so that one could not even speak of male and female any more.[35]

Ramabai followed this line of thought further. The conviction that Christ appealed to all, to the least of all the most, continued to have great significance for her for the rest of her life. But she began to have different ideas about what Christ had brought about among people. During the years of the revival in Mukti salvation from guilt and sin became central. Here the influence of the Methodist missionaries who occupied such a large position in Mukti is undeniable. We no longer hear anything about the renewal of the Hindu nation and the social relevance of the Gospel does not seem to play a significant role any more. All emphasis is now on reconciliation with God through the death of Christ on the cross.

Ramabai herself experienced this shift as a second conversion. Her book *A Testimony* indicates very clearly how she considered this new insight into the work of Christ as the essence of that work, whereby her earlier ideals became worthless. She writes:

> I came to know after eight years from the time of my baptism that I had found the Christian *religion*, which was good enough for me; *but I had not found Christ, Who is the Life of the*

[34] Cited in Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai*, p. 26 (the interview was conducted in December, 1887).

[35] Galatians 3:28. Ramabai cites this text in *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, p. 30; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 311.

> *religion*, and "the Light of every man that cometh into the world."[36]

It is typical that John's gospel is cited in this central text from *A Testimony*, for it is this book that had such special meaning for Ramabai. Her acquaintance with John 4, the conversation with the Samaritan woman, was important when she initially became a Christian. She studied this book more thoroughly during her stay at the Ladies College in Cheltenham, where she attended faithfully the Bible classes given by the rectress every Saturday; they spent an entire year on John 1:1-8. This gospel, in which the divinity of Christ is so strongly accentuated could only become more significant in her faith. But it was not her only source.

It is interesting to see which Bible books Ramabai used in writing *A Testimony*. This small book is peppered with Bible texts, especially the part that describes her so-called being born again and subsequent events. The heart is the letters of Paul (21 quotations) and the Johannine writings (12 quotations). The number of quotes from the synoptic gospels and the book of Acts is rather small (5 and 2, respectively), and the Torah and the prophets are not strongly represented either (1 and 6 quotations, respectively). As far as the Old Testament is concerned, only the Psalms are quoted extensively: 11 quotations. It is clear in the book that Ramabai bases her Christology primarily on Paul and John. There she reads what has become of fundamental significance for her: the Son of God came into the world to reconcile sinners with God through his death.

If the faith *of* Jesus Christ was central for Rammohan Roy, his sayings concerning morality as given in the synoptics, for Ramabai it is faith *in* Jesus as the atoning sacrifice that is central. And that results in an entirely different use of the Bible. For Rammohan, the heart of the Gospel was found in the first three gospels and the fourth added a little something extra. For Ramabai, the fourth gospel and the letters are the centre of the Christian proclamation and the synoptic gospels play a subordinate role. That is also emphasized by the remarkable fact that the few times that Ramabai uses the first three gospels, it is

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[36] Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, pp. 27-28; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, p. 309 (italics hers).

chiefly for one theme. She writes that she learned of the doctrine of the second coming of Jesus only since her second conversion. And it is in that connection that she quotes what Jesus says in Matthew, Mark and Luke, in the discourse on the last things, most of which Rammohan had specifically omitted.

The image of Christ in Ramabai thus bears the features that were central for Methodists and Pentecostals. That is apparent not only from *A Testimony* but also from another work. The Marathi language hymnal includes three songs by Ramabai, two of which are translations of evangelical English hymns, which is already clear from the titles: "I've Found a Friend in Jesus" and "Have You Been to Jesus for the Cleansing Blood?" The third is her composition and also is entirely about the love of Christ and the invitation that goes out from his cross.[37]

Ramabai and Indian Christianity

What is actually Indian about Ramabai's theology? According to M.M. Thomas, her significance for Indian theology lies in the fact that she, on the basis of her Hindu upbringing and in spiritual independence, turned against the dogmatic Christianity that had been imported into India from the West without anyone reflecting on its relevance.[38] But one can make a number of objections to this thesis. It is certainly true that Ramabai distanced herself increasingly as her faith developed from the rigid Anglican church culture in which she had originally become acquainted with the Christian faith. And the finer points of dogmatic differences and controversies among European denominations never attracted her attention at all. Nevertheless, the theology that she ultimately made her own was just as Western in tone. It was not the Anglican import but rather the Methodist one. The influence of the Methodist missionaries like the Americans Minnie F. Abrams and W.W. Bruere can hardly be overestimated.

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[37] MacNicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (English version), p. 91.

[38] M.M. Thomas in: Felix Wilfred and M.M. Thomas, *Theologiegeschichte der Dritten Welt, Indien* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1992), pp. 70-71.

Many lament the fact that Ramabai's later development made all dialogue with Hinduism impossible.[39] She, who had so vehemently opposed calling Hindus "heathens," later used the same term without any scruples to describe her Hindu compatriots. Her own Sanskrit erudition could no longer have any meaning for her and her initial toleration of Hindu ritual in her institutions turned into a complete rejection.

Certainly the influence of foreign missionaries played a role in this development. But there is another factor as well, which must be taken into consideration. Precisely through her turbulent life history and her rare work for oppressed and suffering women Ramabai was confronted with the worst sides of her native religion. And in her own search for salvation she continually encountered expulsion by the brahmanic patriarchal authority who controlled the tradition and used it for their own benefit. That is how Ramabai experienced it in any case. She writes about becoming acquainted with the Christian faith: "What good news for me a woman, a woman born in India, among Brahmans who hold out no hope for me and the like of me." And: "I had not to wait till after undergoing births and deaths for countless millions of times, when I should become a Brahman man, in order to get to know the Brahma."[40] Against that background it is obvious that the discovery of a message of salvation led to an ecstatic experience of the faith. The belief that a human being in Christ may stand before the face of God is more spectacular for Indian oppressed women and lower caste people than can be imagined in the West. That is one of the reasons why in India the ecstatic experience of faith in evangelical groups seems to have more appeal in India than the established churches even today.[41] In the end, Ramabai was fully Indian, even when she subscribed to a very American theology.

In one respect Ramabai would never make any concession to critical Westerners, Anglican or Methodist. In her way of life

[39] Both MacNicol and Sengupta express this repeatedly.

[40] Ramabai, *A Testimony of Our Inexhaustible Treasure*, pp. 32, 33; Ramabai, *Pandita Ramabai through Her Own Words*, pp. 312, 313.

[41] Charlie Pye-Smith, *Rebels and Outcasts: A Journey through Christian India* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1997), esp. chapter 3.

and in the ritual of her institutions she wanted to remain Indian. Over against the Wantage Sisters, she continued to value what was honourable in India. Thus, there was no question that she would adapt her clothing or eating habits to European culture. That also obtained for the religious aspects of her life. She resisted the Anglicans who had thought of a logo for her organization consisting of a cross with a Latin text, and she chose Indian forms for the church services in Mukti. Those who attended church did not sit on pews but, in line with Indian custom, on the floor with their legs crossed. Communion was celebrated with everyday Indian pancakes (*chapatis*) and grape juice instead of bread (whether or not as a wafer) and the wine that was usual for all churches in the country. There were no English hymns but Indian songs (*bhajans*) accompanied by Indian instruments. None of this is very revolutionary by today's standards, but it certainly was at the time. All these Indian elements were heavily opposed by the Methodist missionaries, for example. But she did not agree with them.

Ramabai's greatest significance for the Indian church and theology is undoubtedly that she translated Christ's message into concrete assistance to girls and women in dehumanizing situations. More clearly than anyone else, in nineteenth-century India she showed Jesus to be the liberator of the oppressed. He inspired her to work on behalf of the most despised people in society. Christ thus emerged in the first place as the saviour —the saviour of all. Ramabai therefore sought new forms for the worship service in which her compatriots could appropriate this saviour. She showed Jesus to be the one for whom there were no boundaries, including cultural ones.

CHAPTER 5

The Yoga Master

The Ramakrishna Mission

When Pandita Ramabai visited the United States in 1898 for the second time, she discovered to her dismay that Hinduism had also gained adherents there. She met, in her own words, "Western admirers of that Swami-ism which passes for Hinduism in Western lands."[1] Things had changed since her earlier trip of ten years previously. In 1893 a major conference had been held with representatives from all kinds of religious traditions, the Parliament of the World's Religions. Two Hindus from India had also spoken there, a member of the reform movement Brahmo Samaj and a monk as a representative of traditional Hinduism. The latter in particular had made an overwhelming impression on many Americans. His name was Vivekananda.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) was a dynamic, eloquent man with great charisma. If there was anyone who could be entrusted with presenting an entirely unknown religion to the Western world, it was he. His performance in Chicago made a deep impression on many Americans. At that time Hinduism was generally considered to be a backward religion that could not hold its own against Christianity. Many church leaders also expected Christianity to triumph as a matter of course over all other religions. But this Hinduism now had a representative who won the public over largely through his actions and his words. The young man—he had just turned thirty—cut an exotic figure in his long cloak and turban. But he convinced his listeners primarily by his self-assured presentation of Hinduism as the mother of all religions. After the conference Swami Vivekananda received various invitations to speak. Through his lecture tour Hinduism became a permanent fixture on the religious landscape of the United States.

[1] Cited in Helen S. Dyer, *Pandita Ramabai: The Story of Her Life* (London: Morgan and Scott, s.a. [1900]), p. 79.

It is not surprising that Pandita Ramabai considered the swami's message to be his own creation, one that did not give Westerners a very genuine picture of Hinduism. And, for that matter, she also considered it abhorrent that Christians should convert to the religion that she herself had just renounced. Vivekananda was not out to convert people, however. He was convinced that all religions had ultimately the same foundation and thus displayed fundamental agreements. That view was not common to Hinduism but it was a view that the swami had learned in a genuine Hindu tradition. It was not the classic knowledge of the Sanskrit scriptures, which constituted the guideline for Ramabai for decades. Vivekananda was formed by the mystical experience of his teacher and it was on the basis of that experiential background that he wanted to confront Westerners with another religion that could inspire them without requiring them to convert. And on the basis of that experience, he also had developed certain ideas about the Christian faith and in particular about Jesus Christ.

Ramakrishna: Becoming Just Like Jesus

Swami Vivekananda's teacher was a simple, illiterate priest who had been associated for decades with a temple on the outskirts of Kolkatta. His followers, who respected him greatly, called him Shri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. This guru's secret did not lie in his knowledge of religion but in his very special religious experience. Ramakrishna, originally called Gadadhar Chatterjee, was born in 1836 in a small village in Bengal. He belonged to the brahmanic caste, but study of Sanskrit and the priestly tradition was lost on him: he could barely read and write and was not interested in studying Hindu teachings or philosophy. But as a brahman, he did have the right to perform the rituals. In that way, via a member of his family, he served a new temple in Dakshineshvar close to Kolkatta.

The temple was dedicated in the first place to the goddess Kali, to whom Ramakrishna was especially devoted. The cultus of Kali in Bengal was often associated with tantrism, an esoteric tradition that emphasized that all that exists is permeated by the divine power. This power, *shakti*, can also be personified in Kali. She, then, is regarded as the one who permeates the whole universe, including everything within it. For the initiated, ob-

jects and actions that orthodox brahmanism considers to be impure can, in tantra, represent the presence of the goddess. Ramakrishna trained himself in these secret rituals for a long time under the guidance of a female tantric master. For himself, it was convincing proof that this religious path was right when he experienced the greatest mystical submergence of all, *samadhi*. He had experienced this already at a young age. He related later:

> When I was ten or eleven years old .... I first experienced samadhi. As I was passing through a paddy-field, I saw something and was overwhelmed. There are certain characteristics of God-vision. One sees light, feels joy, and experiences the upsurge of a great current in one's chest, like the burning of a rocket.[2]

Ramakrishna had the same trance experience regularly later in the cultus of Kali and in tantric practice. To eyewitnesses, it seemed that he was not at all a part of the world: his body became rigid and contact with his surroundings stopped and he merged entirely with his internal life. Sometimes his followers had to intervene after hours so that he could return to ordinary life. One time, the *samadhi* was so deep and intense that it was six months before he could function normally again.



But tantra was not the only avenue to such a mystical experience. The temple in Dakshineshvar also had a shrine for Krishna and his consort Radha. For a time Ramakrishna was oriented primarily to devotion to Krishna. The priest not only worshipped the images of Krishna and Radha but also identified with the different personages who had once played a role in Krishna's life. In that way he experienced the devotion to the divinity in the different attitudes described by the *Vaishnavas*: in love like a parent's for a child, in service like a slave's to his

[2] Mahendranath Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishnan*, transl. Swami Nikhilananda, 8th ed. (Mylapore: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1985), I, p. 161.

master, in surrender like a woman to her lover, etc.[3] Ramakrishna went quite far in his identification with these roles: if it was a female role, he dressed and acted like a woman. And when identifying with the divine servant Hanuman, the general of the monkey army in mythology, he tied a cloth around his waist like a tail and jumped around like a monkey. In all these roles he attained mystical ecstasy that proved to him the value of these spiritual exercises. That obtained also for the abstract Vedanta teaching, which he studied for a long time under the guidance of an itinerant teacher. On this path as well, which presupposes knowledge of the unity of the soul and the divine All, he had the mystical experience of *samadhi*. He became convinced that the Brahman, the divine principle of the Vedanta teaching, was nothing else than the divine Mother Kali. Nevertheless, Ramakrishna never became a true *vedantin*—his need for devotion and thus for a distinction between the soul and God was too great for that. He could take part in the merging of the self into the one Reality, as the monistic *vedantins* experienced it, only briefly. In the end, he remained the child of the divine Mother Kali. He thus repeatedly prayed: "O Mother, do not give me Brahmajnana [knowledge of Brahman]."[4]

After his exploration of the different Hindu ways of salvation, Ramakrishna had no doubt that every form of religion ultimately leads to the same goal. He says:

> Do you know what the truth is? God has made different religions to suit different aspirants, times, and countries. All doctrines are only so many paths; but a path is by no means God Himself. Indeed, one can reach God if one follows any of the paths with whole-hearted devotion.[5]

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[3] For these different attitudes (bhava) in the bhakti see J.P. Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten: Mystiek uit India voor westerse lezers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1996), esp. 185-98.

[4] Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I, p. 481: Brahmajnana means "knowledge of Brahman." See also Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I, p. 172: "I never feel like saying, 'I am Brahman.' I say, 'Thou art my Lord and I am thy servant'."

[5] Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, II, p. 559.

After all, the purpose for this mystic is to "realize" God, the intense feeling of the divine presence in mystical experience. Does that also obtain for the religions outside India? In a later phase of his life, Ramakrishna studied both Islam and Christianity. For some time he followed a Muslim lifestyle and this also resulted in a mystical experience. Finally, he attempted to find out more about Christianity.

In 1874 Shri Ramakrishna felt the need to learn more about Christianity. One of his followers, himself a Hindu, had some knowledge of the Bible and read some of it to him. Ramakrishna therefore learned about Jesus' life and proclamation in that way. This resulted in remarkable visionary experiences. It began with a visit to another follower, Jadu Nath Mallick, who owned a country house in Dakshineshvar, where Ramakrishna was a guest. On the walls in the salon were several prints with religious scenes. One of them, to which Ramakrishna was strongly attracted, showed Mary with the child Jesus. He resisted it and appealed to the goddess Kali: "What is it that Thou art doing to me, Mother?" But the image of the other Mother conquered his resistance: all devotion to the Hindu gods disappeared from Ramakrishna's consciousness and he had a vision filled with "Christian" images. This vision took him to Christian churches, where believers burned incense and candles in front of the image of Jesus and prayed to him passionately. Back in his own temple Ramakrishna remained under the spell of this vision. He simply forgot to make his sacrifices to the goddess and for three days he was engrossed in the devotion of the Christians. He saw churches and heard priests preaching; he also saw biblical scenes, such as Jesus taking the almost drowning Peter by the hand. On the fourth day he saw an apparition in the temple garden. A foreign-looking man with a serene expression approached him and gazed intently at him. Ramakrishna wondered who the strange visitor might be and it suddenly struck him: "This is the Christ who poured out his heart's blood for the redemption of mankind and suffered agonies for its sake. It is none else but that Master-Yogin Jesus,

the embodiment of Love!"[6] Ramakrishna saw this figure of Jesus approaching him; Christ embraced him and merged into him. At this, Ramakrishna fell into a trance and, after this experience of *samadhi*, he was convinced of the divinity of Christ and the value of Christian belief as a way to God.

It is fascinating to see how Christian and Hindu elements are combined in Shri Ramakrishna's visions. It begins with the picture of the Madonna in Jadu Mallick's country house—a typical Christian image: Mary with the child Jesus. But at the same time it is an image that someone who always visualized the divinity as the Great Mother and regarded himself as her child would readily recognize. It is not surprising that it was exactly this image that affected Ramakrishna so strongly. There was something prior to this, i.e. having the Bible read to him. But it is characteristic that the spark did not catch until he saw an image that appealed to his own spirituality: becoming emotionally affected always held much greater meaning for this mystic than acquiring knowledge did.

In his visions Ramakrishna saw Christian piety—or, at least, what he imagined to be Christian piety! The scene of devotees burning incense in front of the image of Jesus has, after all, a certain Hindu touch. At first glance, the biblical story that Ramakrishna saw in his visions is completely part of the Christian heritage. But that is not as unequivocal as it seems. He saw the episode from the Gospel in which Peter walks on the water (Matthew 14:22-33), a story that exemplifies faith and grace. When Peter becomes afraid and loses his faith, he begins to sink and cries out to be saved. Jesus then catches hold of him and saves him, in spite of his reprehensible lack of faith. But Ramakrishna seems to give a quite different meaning to this scene. We are, of course, dependent on what Ramakrishna himself lat-

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[6] *Life of Sri Ramakrishna*, Compiled from Various Authentic Sources, 4th ed. (Mayavati, Advaita Ashrama), pp. 253-55. See also Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press), pp. 168-70; Hal W. French, "Reverence to Christ through Mystical Experience and Incarnational Identity: Sri Ramakrishna," in: A. Sharma, *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), pp. 82-105; Romain Rolland, *La vie de Ramakrishna* (Paris: Librairie Stock), pp. 90-94, and the introduction by Swami Nikhilananda in Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I, p. 34.

er said about this vision and how others recorded it. According to one of his first biographers, Ramakrishna thought that Jesus was replying to a question raised by one of his disciples: How can one reach God? Jesus leads him by the hand, walking on the sea. When the man begins to sink, Jesus asks him how he feels. The man, fighting to survive, screams that he is dying. Then Jesus speaks to the man who is gasping for air: "When separated from Him, if your heart feels like this, then you will attain Him."[7] This theme returns constantly in Ramakrishna: only through a dominant desire, such as a drowning person's need to survive, is it possible to make that supreme effort by which mystical union with God can be attained.

The scene of Peter walking on water is thus interpreted in a way more in keeping with Ramakrishna's Hindu background. The image retained great significance for him. A picture of this scene was later hung on the wall of his quarters in the temple; it was the only image that was borrowed from the Christian tradition.[8] But Ramakrishna would also have made a connection between this picture and a Hindu myth. The Puranic literature relates the story of a man who crosses the sea between Sri Lanka and India on foot. The pious king Vibhishana had given him a leaf with something written on it, tied up in his garment, which enables him to awaken the enormous spiritual power by which he can walk on water. Halfway across, however, he is distracted by curiosity and takes out the leaf, but the leaf only contains the name of the god Rama. The man then begins to doubt and consequently sinks into the sea. Ramakrishna told this Hindu story to his students.[9] In contrast to the biblical story, there is no salvation for the drowning man: whoever is unable to summon the power to rise above the mundane is irretrievably lost.

For Ramakrishna, the central point is that human endeavour allows one to go beyond all boundaries. This requires the strongest motivation as well as the willingness to break through all limitations. One must therefore travel the road of methodical

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[7] Ram Candra Datta, cited by Kripal, *Kali's Child*, pp. 168-69. Kripal's conclusion is: "Once again we see how a preeminently Hindu lesson is drawn from an allegedly non-Hindu event."

[8] Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I, p. 266.

[9] Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, I, p. 87.

training until the end. Ramakrishna regards Jesus Christ as someone who walked the whole length of that road. He is the yoga master, the accomplished ascetic who realized the divine in his own existence through his physical and spiritual exertions. Ramakrishna thus sees in the life of Jesus a rejection of worldly desire and a yearning for the divine similar to that which characterized his own life. At the same time, it appears from his words that he is also aware of the meaning ascribed to Christ by Christians. Christ's passion and the conviction that humanity finds salvation through his blood are part of Ramakrishna's image of Jesus. But he does not identify himself with people who need such a salvation. On the contrary, he identifies himself with Jesus, as the end of the vision strikingly indicates. Christ who is able to forsake everything, even his own life, approaches him and merges into him. Ramakrishna has become Jesus.

Ramakrishna's followers did not have any difficulty accepting that identification. The accounts of the master's talks with his pupils repeatedly attest that they considered him to be a divine incarnation. Especially in the last year of his life the sense of such a divine identity grew among his disciples. Mahendra Nath Gupta, who published the conversations of Ramakrishna under the pseudonym "M," discusses the question repeatedly with his guru. The parallel with Christ is expressed more than once. Thus, "M" says to Ramakrishna: "Further, you tell us that you and the Mother are one. Likewise, Christ said, 'I and My Father are one'."[10] Elsewhere, "M" concludes that Christ, Chaitanya, and Ramakrishna "are one and the same. It is the same Person that has become all these three."[11] Ramakrishna is apparently allowed a place in the series of *avataras,* divine descents. Especially among the *Vaishnavas*, it is a significant point of doctrine that God appears regularly on earth in human form. Rama and Krishna are the most important *avataras,* but later saints, such as the ecstatic *bhakta* Chaitanya, are also often re-

[10] Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, II, p. 838. The text cited from the Gospel (John 10:30) will prove to be of great significance in the dialogue between Christians and Hindus, particularly when the latter are Ramakrishna's followers.

[11] Gupta, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, II, p. 825.

garded as *avataras*.[12] Ramakrishna has now been added to this series of divine descents. But not only Ramakrishna—Jesus Christ as well is given a place in the Hindu pantheon. It is a notion that will challenge many Christian theologians.

Ramakrishna's importance lies in the fact that he, as one of the first Hindu gurus to do so, presented the various religions, including Christianity, as paths to the same goal. How he envisaged this goal was clearly dictated by Hindu conviction: it was the mystical realization of God in human existence. Therefore, it is not surprising that Ramakrishna regarded Jesus in the first place as a *yogi,* a master in the art of God-realization. Such an assessment could be demonstrated from various Hindu points of view. The *avatara* doctrine of the *Vaishnavas* was an important contribution. The monistic Vedanta doctrine could also provide a framework for Hindu Christology: it was possible to regard all divine figures as representations of what lies behind illusory mundane existence—the ultimate Reality, Brahman. Most of Ramakrishna's disciples would follow that line of thought. For a long time, it was assumed that Ramakrishna himself was also primarily a *vedantin*. However, some more recent studies clearly demonstrate that Tantrism was his main source of inspiration.[13] He considered the whole phenomenal world to be pervaded by a divine power, the *shakti,* personified as Mother Kali. The Mother came to him in many different forms—why not in the form of Mother Mary and her child?

Christianity became a partner in dialogue through this universalistic attitude based on mysticism. There was a common ground, and this enabled Ramakrishna's followers to come into contact with Christians without feeling the need to convert

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[12] For Chaitanya, see Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten*, pp. 131-46.

[13] Walter G. Neevel, "The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna," in: Bardwell L. Smith (ed.), *Hinduism: New Essays in the History of Religions,* Studies in the History of Religions, Suppl. to *Numen* XXXIII (Leiden: Brill), pp. 53-97. Kripal, *Kali's Child*. The latter also emphasizes the homoerotic component of Ramakrishna's mysticism. This was, of course, opposed strongly by the Ramakrishna Order. Cf. Atmajnanananda, "Scandals, Cover-ups, and Other Imagined Occurrences in the Life of Ramakrishna: An Examination of Jeffrey Kripal's *Kali's Child*," *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 1 (1997): 401-20.

them. And that was precisely what Swami Vivekananda did as the first Hindu representative in North America.

Vivekananda: Jesus as World Renouncer

When Ramakrishna died in 1886, he left behind a circle of students who wanted to pursue the road their master had shown in his own life. Half a year after his death, the initially vague plans for a monastic organization began to crystallize, and the story of Jesus played a special role in its genesis. On a certain evening the students came together in the village of Antpur. According to the tradition, which does have some legendary features, they meditated while sitting around a bonfire. On this occasion Narendra, later Swami Vivekananda, told the story of Jesus Christ's life, starting with the virgin birth right up to the resurrection and emphasizing the aspect of world renunciation in every episode of Jesus' life. He then sketched how the message of salvation had been disseminated throughout the whole world by the apostles. Finally, Narendra made an emotional appeal to his friends, as apostles of Ramakrishna, to propagate the latter's message and, to that end, to vow to renounce the world. All of them, therefore, took the vow of *sannyasa*: they were prepared to live as mendicants in order to serve humanity. And if we believe the author of the history of the Ramakrishna Movement, at that moment they realized that it was Christmas Eve.[14]

Thus, Jesus' life history is foundational for their inspiration at the beginning of the Ramakrishna Order. That is not that extraordinary, given that Narendra had attended a missions school, the Scottish Church College in Calcutta. He had, of course, acquired a thorough knowledge of the Bible and Ramakrishna had certainly taught him that the Christian faith was also a way to God. The apostolic *elan* of the early church was in keeping with his own endeavours to shape a religious community. But it is still surprising that Narendra so vehemently emphasized asceticism and renunciation of the world in his pre-

[14] Gambhirananda, *History of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission* (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957), pp. 50-51. For a critical evaluation of the Antpur history and other foundation legends see J.P. Schouten, "Hinduism and Development: Three Case Studies," *Religion and Society* XXVIII (1981): 68-99.

sentation of the life of Jesus. This would remain a constant theme, also in his later lectures on Christianity as Swami Vivekananda.



While Swami Vivekananda's first accounts of Jesus are characterized by great affinity and recognition, his approach became more critical later on. The change is due to his experiences in the United States—at that time a Christian country *par excellence*. At the Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda made a profound impression on the public and soon became a celebrity. But that fame had a price. Orthodox Christians reacted with resistance and condescension to the Hindu presence amid the Christian diversity. Vivekananda was struck by a narrow-minded form of Christianity that he had not encountered very often in India. He was apparently offended by the impolite treatment he received from some of the congress delegates and the attacks in parts of the Christian press. On various occasions he let himself be enticed into a counterattack. Looking for statements about Jesus and Christianity in the eight volumes of his collected works we can find a multiplicity of positions, ranging from highly appreciative to extremely critical.

Therefore, the context of certain things he said must be taken into account. Isolated utterances of his have often played an unjustified role in the history of Hindu-Christian dialogue. A striking example is the following characterization of the Christian tradition that has become rather famous: "Every man in Christian countries has a huge cathedral on his head and on top of that a book."[15] It is helpful to know that this sentence is found in a very specific context in a lecture for American Chris-

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[15] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works: Mayavati Memorial Edition*, vol. VII, 8th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), p. 30. Cf. Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (New York: Farrar/Straus/Giroux, 1980), p. 13. Moreover, we should keep in mind that we are dependent for what Vivekananda said on the sometimes fragmentary notes of his listeners.

tians. He had just confronted his audience with the unfair way in which the Hindus in India were criticized by the colonial rulers because of their free religion. Over against that freedom of opinion in Hinduism, Vivekananda presents the book religion created by the church in which everything has to conform to the Bible. He attacks in particular a special part of Christianity: "[I]t is the most horrible tyranny, this tyranny of the Protestant Bible." An image of such oppression is the man with the cathedral on his head and on top of it a book. The rest of the same sentence is, however, often left unquoted: "... and yet man lives and grows! Does not this prove that man is God?"[16]

In this small excerpt from one lecture it already becomes clear what Vivekananda appreciates in Christianity and what he rejects. His approach is founded completely on the Vedanta doctrine. Ultimately, there is only one reality, Brahman, and the essential core of a human being, the *atman*, is nothing else than Brahman. Translated into Christian terminology, human beings are God. In realizing that, of course, the human being becomes free. Christ is the image of such a free, "realized" human being. But, in Vivekananda's opinion, the church has not dared to accept such freedom. It has locked Christ up in a fundamentalist system, based on a book. But there is nothing wrong with the book itself. Vivekananda had begun the series of lectures in question with the reading of a scriptural passage, namely the prologue of the gospel of John. Of that passage he said: "In the first five verses of John is the whole essence of Christianity: each verse is full of the profoundest philosophy."[17] And he explained that the "Word" that "was God" points to the great incarnations of God, i.e. Krishna, the Buddha, Jesus and Ramakrishna. Or, in terms more determined by Vedanta philosophy: the Absolute, Brahman, can be known only through the tint of humanity, i.e., through Christ.

In Christ the most profound knowledge is made available to us: the identity of human beings and God. That is the central proposition of Swami Vivekananda. A good example of a balanced exposition of Christianity, with this proposition as the central point, is the lecture *Christ, the Messenger* that he gave in

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[16] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. VII, 8th ed., p. 30.

[17] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. VII, 8th ed., p. 3.

Los Angeles in January 1900. The text of this lecture, based upon stenographic notes, is included in *The Complete Works*. The lecture, held for a large audience in a crammed hall, proved to be one of his most successful performances.[18] Vivekananda states most emphatically that he looks at Jesus from an Eastern point of view. The argument was formulated for the first time by Raja Rammohan Roy: Jesus was himself an Asian, an Oriental. In Vivekananda's words: "Many times you forget, also, that the Nazarene himself was an Oriental of Orientals. With all your attempts to paint him with blue eyes and yellow hair, the Nazarene was still an Oriental." He then makes a sharp distinction between Western and Eastern culture. It is here that we encounter his famous saying: "The voice of Asia has been the voice of religion. The voice of Europe is the voice of politics."[19] Of course, this evaluation is coloured by the speaker's awareness that he belongs to a nation that had been colonized. But there are deeper levels as well. Vivekananda analyzes European culture on the basis of the classical Greek worldview. Here he discovers a this-worldly orientation in which even the gods are dominated by human passions. Over against this culture he places Eastern culture, which always reaches for what is beyond that which exists. He points out to his audience that all divine messengers, without exception, were Orientals.

Vivekananda thus conveys the orientation of the messenger Christ as directed at that which surpasses the mundane. However, being an authentic Oriental, Christ is in this respect "intensely practical." This is a keyword in Vivekananda's oeuvre. In his own religion, he wanted to develop a "practical Vedanta," intending to present monistic philosophy in such a way that it did not become entangled in speculation but offered people a practical way to achieve liberation. And a practical Vedanta would also provide the motivation to labour

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[18] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. IV, 10th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), pp. 138-53. On his lecture in Los Angeles see *The Life of Swami Vivekananda*, by his Eastern and Western Disciples, vol. I-II, 2nd ed. (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1933), pp. 805-08; Sailendra Nath Dhar, *A Comprehensive Biography of Swami Vivekananda*, II (Madras: Vivekananda Prakashan Kendra, 1975-76), pp. 1218-24.

[19] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. IV, 10th ed., p. 142.

for the benefit of others. The monistic teaching presupposes the oneness of all that exists and thus implies respect for fellow human beings and concern for their welfare, since every human being is the seat of Brahman.[20] Vivekananda had given practical content to this ideal by setting up, next to his monastic order, the Ramakrishna Math, an extensive organization for social and educational work, the Ramakrishna Mission.

Christ also offers similarly a "practical" religion, a way that can be travelled. But Vivekananda's interpretation of this religious way is remarkable. He hardly refers to the solidarity and charity that he wants to emphasize in Hindu circles. Obviously, he considers that to be sufficiently elaborated in Christianity. But Christians have to learn something else and thus he wants to teach them spirituality. The life of Jesus implies directions for his followers: he did not commit himself to achievements in this world. Especially significant to Vivekananda is Jesus' saying: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20; Luke 9:58). It is in such an abandoning of worldly affairs that the path to salvation lies.

The teachings of Christ culminate, according to Vivekananda, in the appeal to realize human destiny, i.e. to be the son of God. Not only was Jesus the Son of God, but he taught that all people were filled by an immortal spirit and could therefore be called sons of God. Vivekananda quotes two texts from the Gospel that have retained a central place in Hindu-Christian dialogue. The first text is: "[T]he kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). This text originally expressed Jesus' belief that the kingdom of God was not something in the future but was already present. The traditional English translation, however, could be misunderstood as indicating that human beings can find the kingdom of God in their inner selves. This interpretation is used very often by Hindus (as well as in Western esoteric circles). The second text is the one we encountered already in the conversations of Shri Ramakrishna: "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Vivekananda does not interpret this text as characterizing the unique relationship of Christ with

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[20] On the practical Vedanta see Schouten, "Hinduism and Development."

his heavenly Father but as a statement about the ontological basis of every human being. Thus, the message of Christ becomes an echo of the Advaita Vedanta: behind all imaginary diversity lies the unity of all that exists and human beings may understand themselves within that unity—as not different from God.

A possible objection to this explanation could be that the Gospel accentuates other aspects as well. Very often, the distance between God and humankind is emphasized. Vivekananda is certainly aware of that but gives a special interpretation of this variety of aspects in the relation of humankind to God. In his opinion, there are three levels on which human beings perceive God. For the undeveloped human being, God is highly exalted, the heavenly judge. The Lord's Prayer, regarded by Vivekananda as a child's prayer, fits that image: "Our Father which art in heaven." It is not untrue, but it is the lowest level of spirituality. On a higher level, God is regarded as omnipresent. A text that is in keeping with such a conception, is the following: "I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you" (John 14:20). The highest level, which can be reached by only a few people, is that where the unity of God and human beings is recognized. Here the words of the psalmist are appropriate: "You are 'gods'; you are all sons of the Most High" (Psalm 82:6; quoted in John 10:34). It is of these people that Jesus speaks when he says: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

What must one do to reach this stage? Vivekananda is convinced that Jesus indicated only one path: that of renunciation of the world. He quotes Jesus' words to the rich young man who wished to inherit eternal life: "One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me" (Mark 10:21).[21] Therefore, it is not surprising that, for Vivekananda, the saying about losing one's life for Christ's sake constitutes the climax in the teaching of the Gospel. He passionately confronts his Christian audience with the voice of Jesus that exhorts everybody to give up their life in

[21] Here the text is cited from the King James Version, which is the version Vivekananda used.

order to find true life in Christ (Matthew 16:25). The morality of Jesus' teachings obviously culminates in unselfishness and abandonment of property: "to be unselfish, perfectly selfless, is salvation itself."[22]

In this ardent speech a typical image of Jesus emerges. It is the image that reflects the lifestyle of the speaker himself, a monk. Everything that is said in the Gospel about the goodness of earthly life and the task of people in that respect is omitted or regarded as a preliminary phase in Jesus' teaching. The real message is the appeal to give up everything and to leave the world behind. Then the true destiny of human beings becomes visible: a human being at the divine level. In other lectures as well Vivekananda clearly indicates that he considers Jesus to be an ascetic and one who renounced the world. The yoga master who approached Ramakrishna has been given other features. In Ramakrishna's conception, it could be assumed that Jesus would have attained the divine level within worldly existence and likewise that he showed to his followers a spiritual way in their mundane life. That would fit into the world of tantrism and it would also be connected with *bhakti* spirituality.[23] In Vivekananda's presentation, the believer has to abandon everything. Here we see the monk in the classical tradition of Vedanta: if the whole phenomenal world is ultimately nothing more than illusion *(maya),* then the truth can only be discovered by those who renounce the world. In another lecture Vivekananda states plainly: "Christ was a Sannyasin, and his religion is essentially fit for Sannyasins only."[24]

It is obvious that Christians will miss vital parts of their faith in this image of Christ. But in the Hindu context as well

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[22] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. IV, 10th ed., p. 150.

[23] Most modern authors regard Ramakrishna primarily as a *tantrika*. See Kripal, *Kali's Child*, 1995; Neevel, "The Transformation of Sri Ramakrishna." N.P. Sil ("Vivekananda's Ramakrishna: An Untold Story of Mythmaking and Propaganda," *Numen* 40 (1993): 38-62) depicts him primarily as a *bhakti* adept. The one does not exclude the other, but the tantric aspect certainly cannot be denied.

[24] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. VI, 9th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), p. 109. This quotation, however, is taken from notes made by students. The context is unclear to some extent.

this approach could be evaluated as being considerably limited. Stanley Samartha rightly concludes that

> neither the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ which made such an impression on Raja Ram Mohan Roy's mind nor the sufferings and cross of Christ which so touched the heart of Mahatma Gandhi seem to have made any impression on Swami Vivekananda.[25]

However, it should be borne in mind that Vivekananda, with his strong sense of justice, clashed continuously with injustice and hypocrisy in the practice of Christianity. Neither the colonial church in India nor the rigid orthodoxy in North America gave him the impression that Jesus' words could have a beneficial effect in society. He was not very impressed by the Christian culture with its "three B's: Bible, bayonet, and brandy."[26] His emphasis on renouncing the world and Johannine mystics may be one-sided, but it nevertheless reveals a sincere fascination for the person of Jesus. And one facet of the work and teaching of Christ, often underestimated in the West, has gained new significance for many in Vivekananda's audience, both Hindus and Christians.

Later Developments

The following generations in Vivekananda's monastic order were likewise sincerely interested in the person of Jesus Christ. It has always remained the general conviction in the Ramakrishna Movement that the spiritual teachers of the non-Hindu religions must be held in esteem. The usual argumentation was that in their teachings one can find elements of the universal religion that is elaborated completely in the Vedanta philosophy. Among these teachers, Jesus and the Buddha occupy the most prominent places. Christmas is the occasion on which the significance of Jesus Christ and his teaching are highlighted in the Ramakrishna centres. The fact that Christmas Eve had a special place in the legends about the foundation of the Order,

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[25] S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974), p. 59.

[26] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. II, 13th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1976), p. 517.

increases the importance of that occasion. Since the beginning of the twentieth century Christmas is celebrated every year in all centres of the Ramakrishna Math (order) and Mission. The ritual that is practised suggests that it is Christian, but it is in fact purely Hindu. A description of the celebration at the headquarters of the movement, the monastery at Belur, in 1914 provides some interesting details. One of the monks had dressed up as a Roman Catholic priest and worshipped by presenting offerings to a picture of the Madonna with Child. The offerings consisted of candlelight and flowers, as well as a fruitcake and a cigar, in order to underscore the Western character of the festival! After the service, a meditation session was held in which the monks tried to experience the actual presence of Christ.[27] Usually, a reading from the Bible was also included in these Christmas celebrations—Luke 2 or the Sermon on the Mount were the favourite lessons. One of the monks or a Christian guest gave a speech.

The Christ We Adore is the title of a little book containing the Christmas address of one of the later leaders of the Ramakrishna Movement.[28] It provides clear insight into the notions about Jesus that are constitutive for the Christmas celebration of the monastics. The title is an allusion to a Christmas carol that is also very popular in India: "O come, all ye faithful" with the refrain "O come, let us adore Him." The speaker who reveals whom the monastics adore is Swami Ranganathananda, one of the most influential monks of the Order who would later, in 1998, at the age of 89 become the thirteenth President of the

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[27] Prabhavananda, *Religion in Practice* (Hollywood: Vedanta Press, 1969), p. 209; Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta* (New York: New American Library), p. 8. For later celebrations cf. also Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (Belur, 1963); Gerald B. Cooke, *A Neo-Hindu Ashrama in South India* (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1966), p. 24 (Bangalore, 1960s).

[28] Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore* (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969).

Ramakrishna Math and Mission.[29] But this Christmas address was delivered as early as in 1954, when he was the secretary of the Delhi branch. The celebration took place in the scholarly institute of the Order, the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta.

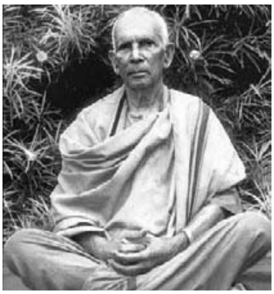
In his long address Ranganathananda gives an elaborate overview of the life of Jesus. The material is taken completely from the gospels. It is remarkable that the swami chiefly uses the synoptic gospels. The great preference of Hindu monks for the gospel of John is not found in his works. The first verses of that gospel that, according to Swami Vivekananda, contain the whole essence of Christianity do not even occur in his Christmas address. On the other hand, the Sermon on the Mount is treated extensively. And that too is a new orientation in comparison with Vivekananda. The latter did not exactly care much for the numerous moral precepts of the Sermon on the Mount. In his opinion, the religious calibre of such ethics was meagre; only the novice on the spiritual path could benefit from it. He once called the famous Golden Rule, with which the Sermon on the Mount ends, "excessively vulgar" because of its orientation to the self.[30] For him, the heart of all religion was to transcend the orientation to the self and to achieve unity with the godhead. One text in the Sermon of the Mount stood out, in his

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[29] He was born in December 1908 in Tirukkur, Kerala. He joined the Ramakrishna Mission when he was 18 and in 1933 he was initiated as a *sannyasi* by Swami Shivananda. He first worked at different Indian branches of the Ramakrishna Movement, then in Rangoon and in Karachi. Subsequently, he was for a time secretary of the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture in Calcutta. His publications are on faith and science, and on the social ethics of Hinduism. In the 1980s, before a branch existed in the Netherlands with its own spiritual leader, Swami Ranganathananda visited the country different times. In 2000 he was in the news when he refused to accept the highest distinction of the Republic of India, the Padma Vibhushan, because he did not find personal marks of honour fitting for a monk. Ranganathananda died in 2005 at the age of 96.

[30] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. III, 11th ed. (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1973), p. 500.

view, i.e. "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).[31]



For Swami Ranganathananda, too, this is a central text in the teachings of Jesus. He regards this saying as the expression of Jesus' new and revolutionary view that it is possible to realize unity with God in this world and not only after death. In this connection he refers to that other Scriptural text that has extraordinary significance for Hindus: "The Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). Ranganathananda also interprets "within you" as "in your inner self": the Kingdom of God can be experi enced in the inner life. Pureness in heart is a condition for sharing in this Kingdom. But whoever fulfils this condition can realize unity with God and thus see God. Ranganathananda quotes two texts from the Upanishads in order to demonstrate that the goal in both religions is identical. These texts could be translated as "Verily, the self must be seen," and "He who is without desire, sees the greatness of the self" (Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad 11:4:5; Katha Upanishad 1:2:20). Typical for the linguistic usage in the Ramakrishna Movement is that in both texts the words for "see" are translated by "realize." All emphasis is on deliberate human endeavour.

Ranganathananda argues in his address that this is what Jesus intended in his teaching, and regards it as contrasting sharply with the old Israelite religion. There God was, in his view, far away and elevated above human beings in heavenly majesty. As a result, that religion could only guide human beings in their moral conduct in life. Through John the Baptist and Jesus, however, a new worldview[32] emerged in Israel, in which the transcendent comes within reach. The relationship with God is not determined any longer by obedience and fear but by love. That the swami himself is affected by this aspect in the gospel appears from the moving way in which he writes: "Jesus

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[31] Vivekananda, *The Complete Works*, vol. IV, 10th ed., p. 148.

[32] Ranganathananda uses the German word *Weltanschauung*, which is popular with several Hindu gurus.

proclaimed a religion of wide and deep horizons; he brought God near to man and bound both with the cord of love; he eliminated fear as the medium of their relationship."[33] This is relevant to Ranganathananda because he considers it to be a striking parallel with Hindu religion. He quotes the parable of the house built upon the rock (Matthew 7:24-27) and connects it with a similar thought in the Bhagavad-Gita.[34] His conclusion is that both Christ and Krishna emphasize *sadhana*, religious practice, in order to reach *anubhava*, the realization of God.[35]

Ranganathananda clearly presents the message of Jesus as an appeal to realize the divine presence by means of one's own spiritual effort. And this message is meant for the masses: it has universal significance. He is convinced that Jesus published such a truth and that he did so with a special authority. What is the basis of that authority? Ranganathananda's extensive report of the life of Jesus points constantly to the same conclusion. Jesus is not an ordinary man but a divine incarnation. Many episodes in his life, viewed from a Hindu perspective, constitute the convincing proof of his divinity.

Ranganathananda starts with the angelic choir at Jesus' birth, in which respect he quotes a beautiful text from the Narada Bhakti Sutra about gods dancing at the birth of a saviour (Narada Bhakti Sutra 71). Then comes the story about the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple, also meaningful in this connection. The baptism in the Jordan is, according to the swami, the occasion when Jesus had his first recorded spiritual experience, when the voice spoke from heaven. The gathering of the disciples is proof to an Indian that Jesus was a true spiritual teacher, a guru. Then the "healing touch of Jesus" is discussed and the episodes in which he demonstrates his compassion, especially with regard to sinful women. The conclusion

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[33] Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, p. 7.

[34] Bhagavad-Gita XII:20: "Those devotees who practise, in a converging life endeavour, this teaching of mine which fulfils all righteousness and leads to immortality, endowed with faith and a godward passion, are extremely dear to me" (Ranganathananda's translation, *The Christ We Adore*, pp. 19-20).

[35] Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, p. 20.

is unmistakable: Hindus recognize such a person "spontaneously ... as a divine incarnation."[36]

Ranganathananda attaches little importance to the suffering of Jesus, calling it a tragedy, bereft of any special spiritual beauty. He compares it to the end of Rama's life and that of Krishna: both can also be characterized as tragedies. "But we did not build our religion on them" is his indication of the difference between the two religions.[37] He even denotes the way in which Christians deal with their founder's death a greater tragedy than his tragic death itself: "The man of joy, which Jesus undoubtedly was in real life, became transformed into the man of sorrows, in dogma."[38]

Thus, some lines in the view of Swami Vivekananda appear to be pursued here. It is not the suffering Christ but the teacher who is prominent. Jesus Christ is considered to be a Son of God, a divine incarnation. He brings a teaching that makes it possible for people to realize unity with God in their own existence. But whereas Vivekananda regarded Jesus as a *sannyasi* with a message for *sannyasins*, Ranganathananda is convinced of the universal importance of Jesus' message about the Kingdom of God that is within the individual. The Sermon on the Mount, in particular, is proof to him that Jesus intended to show, not a few world renouncers, but the masses how God proves to be near. That is a remarkable Christmas message in a community of monastics.

There are also some other monks of the Ramakrishna Order who were exploring the meaning of Christ, and even more systematically and more intensively than Ranganathananda. They had a special reason for doing so: they had been sent as Indian monks to America as missionaries. Among them were two who exercised a strong influence on Hindu-Christian dialogue, especially in the United States. One worked on the east coast and the other on the west coast, and each wrote a book on Jesus that attracted particular attention.

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[36] Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, p. 39.

[37] Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, p. 39.

[38] Ranganathananda, *The Christ We Adore*, p. 43.



Swami Akhilananda

Hindu View of Christ is the title of a book that contains the texts of twelve lectures by Swami Akhilananda. This Ramakrishna monk had been sent to the United States in 1926, when he was 34 years old, and he would be active in the New England states until his death in 1962. Shortly after his arrival, Swami Akhilananda became the head of one of the American branches of the Ramakrishna Movement, i.e. the Vedanta Society of Providence. He later founded a branch in Boston, where he built up many contacts in the academic world and the church. Akhilananda gladly entered into dialogue with Christians, especially with theologians at the universities and ministers of the various churches. He regarded himself as their colleague, on the same level but from a different religion. Even his dress reflected that attitude, for he sometimes wore a black suit with a clerical collar like the Anglican clergy. His book on Christ was published in 1949 with a foreword by the dean of the Boston University School of Theology. The book attracted worldwide attention, and several Christian theologians studied Akhilananda's Christological reflections.[39]

Swami Prabhavananda[40] had taken monastic orders in 1921, at the age of 28. Two years later he was sent to America in order to work as a Hindu missionary in the states on the west coast. For some time he was the assistant to the monk in charge of the San Francisco branch but afterwards founded his own centre in Portland, Oregon. In 1929 he settled in Hollywood at the invitation of one of the American disciples of Vivekananda, Sister Lalita. He gathered a modest circle of pupils, whose spiritual guide he remained until his death in 1976. One of his nu-

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[39] Heinrich Barlage, *Christ Saviour of Mankind: A Christian Appreciation of Swami Akhilananda*, Veröffentlichungen des Missionspriesterseminars St. Augustin bei Bonn, 27 (St. Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1977); Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, pp. 61-72; Otto Wolff, *Christus unter den Hindus* (Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1965), pp. 187-209.

[40] On Prabhavananda see Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple*.

merous books focuses on Christian belief and is called *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta* and contains the revised texts of a series of lectures that the swami delivered to his disciples. The first edition appeared in 1963 and was reprinted several times; it was also translated into Dutch by the Amsterdam "School voor Filosofie."[41]

Both Hindu missionaries had much in common. They differed only one year in age and both had been pupils of Swami Brahmananda who succeeded Vivekananda as the leader of the Ramakrishna Movement. Their guru Brahmananda had once received a vision of Jesus Christ and this induced him to a special devotion. It was on his initiative that all Ramakrishna centres came to celebrate Christmas every year.[42] Brahmananda stimulated his pupils to continue the activities that Vivekananda had started in America. In conformity with the universalistic ideals of Ramakrishna and his followers, the purpose was not conversion but an enrichment of spirituality in the West. Both missionaries considered this to be their task.

However, there were also differences. Swami Akhilananda was more oriented towards Western culture. He felt at home in the urban environment of the east coast and was a member of numerous religious and academic associations. He regarded his special contribution to that milieu to be in the field of practical wisdom inspired by Indian spirituality. Thus, one of his books deals with Hindu psychology and bears the striking subtitle *Its Meaning for the West*. Likewise, his book on Jesus Christ has a practical outlook. Many problems of life are discussed in which Christ's teaching offers a solution, viewed from a Hindu standpoint of course. Swami Prabhavananda did not try as hard to take up contact with church and university circles. The pupils who met at his Hollywood centre included a number of artists especially, whom he acquainted with classical Hindu literature. In this context he published English translations of several

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[41] On this organization, which has clear Hindu leanings, see R. Kranenborg, "De school voor filosofie als neo-hindoeistische beweging," in: R. Bakker (ed.), *Religieuze bewegingen in Nederland*, part 10 (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij VU, 1985), pp. 7-65.

[42] Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, p. 8.

sacred writings, including the Bhagavad-Gita, Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms and also collections from the Bhagavata Purana and the Upanishads. His book on the Sermon on the Mount demonstrates in particular the similarities between Jesus' words and the Hindu scriptures.

A comparison of the books on Jesus by both Hindu monks yields many similarities. Constitutive for both is the image of Christ as portrayed in the gospel according to John. Both were fully in agreement with Vivekananda's assertion that the first verses of this gospel contain the whole essence of Christianity. Swami Akhilananda even opens his book by quoting John 1:1-5. For him, Christ is primarily the Word that was in the beginning and was no less than God. He presents Christ very explicitly as the Son of God, as an incarnation. But when this image is given specific content, the Hindu framework within which Akhilananda places the Christian faith becomes evident. He cites the famous text from the Bhagavad-Gita in which Krishna says "Whenever there is decline of dharma (righteousness, religion) and rise of adharma (evil), then I body Myself forth.... [F]or the establishment of dharma, I come into being in every age" (Bhagavad-Gita IV:7-8). This is the key text for the belief in a series of incarnations, as it has been developed particularly by those who worship Vishnu.[43] Jesus is considered to be one of these incarnations. Akhilananda is definitely convinced of that. To him it means that Hinduism and Christianity have something in common: being the only two of the great religions that recognize that God incarnates Himself as a human being. But there is also a difference: for Christians this incarnation is unique, whereas Hindus see a succession of *avataras*. Nevertheless, Jesus fits so convincingly into the *avatara* doctrine that the similarity between both religions has the greatest impact for the swami. As a real *avatara*, Jesus appeared on earth with a definite purpose of which he was continually aware. Thus, Akhilananda portrays Jesus as a self-assured divine messenger with no doubt about his mission. As a consequence, biblical episodes such as the temptation in the desert and the internal struggle in Gethsemane do not occur in his story.

[43] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, pp. 21, 32; Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 36-37.

Akhilananda was fully aware of the fact that not all Christians share the same understanding of Christ. It is fascinating to see how this Hindu theologian takes sides on the theological battleground of the Christians. The Hindu experiences more affinity with orthodox Christians than with liberals. Akhilananda rejects the liberal image of Jesus that denies that Christ is divine. He agrees with orthodox Christians in their emphasis on the uniqueness of Christ in comparison with other human beings.[44] The question remains as to whether precisely these Christians could arouse enthusiasm about support by a Hindu.

The Johannine Christ surfaces even more than in the concept of *avatara* when Akhilananda discusses the thought of the Vedanta. A Christology can also be erected on this basis. The core statement of one who has realized the unity between his own soul and the all-pervasive Brahman is "I am Brahman." Akhilananda equates this utterance with Jesus' saying in the gospel of John "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30).[45] Thus, another image of Jesus emerges. He is not the *avatara* who descends from heaven but the human being who is able by his spiritual endeavours to rise to the highest level of enlightenment—he is a *yogi*. Much of what Jesus says, primarily in the gospel of John, supports this image. It is not surprising that the story of the transfiguration on the mountain is cited in this context. Both images, *avatara* and *yogi*, conflict to some extent, but this is not a problem for the Hindu theologian. He considers Jesus to be a "born teacher": as an incarnation of God, he did not need to learn anything but could teach the fullness of the spiritual life immediately to the people.[46] And it is the meaning of this teaching for everyday life that constitutes the subject of Swami Akhilananda's book.

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[44] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 43.

[45] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 72.

[46] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 96. Cf. p. 27 where he describes Christ as a *nitya-siddha*, a perfect *yogi* from the start who does spiritual exercises primarily to be an example for others.



Swami Prabhavananda's book on Jesus also aims to be a practical guide for the spiritual life based on the teachings of Jesus. But he too cannot escape the question of who Christ in fact was. It is remarkable that in his book the Johannine Christ again plays the leading role, although he writes his book as a commentary on Matthew 5-7. But however carefully he explains the Sermon on the Mount verse by verse, several arguments nevertheless stem from elsewhere. This is particularly the case when he discusses not the teachings but the person of Christ. The theology of the creative Word, God incarnate, as described in John 1 also plays a major role in Prabhavananda. It appears that he has a profound knowledge of the development of the concept of *logos*. Via Plato, the Stoics and Philo, he ends up with the gospel of John who describes the meaning of Christ via this concept. For Prabhavananda, there can be no doubt that it can be said that the Word of God became incarnate in Jesus Christ. He formulates the new application of the logos doctrine by John as "attributing a real personality to the Logos" and "emphasising not its creative aspect but its redemptive function."[47]

More than his confrere, Prabhavananda is inclined to dismiss all differences between Christian and Hindu doctrine. He holds that there is complete dogmatic agreement between the two religions. What Hindus call *avatara* is exactly the same as what Christians mean by "Son of God" and the Sermon on the Mount simply offers the same doctrine as the Bhagavad-Gita, even though the presentation is different. And the text from the Gospel "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" is equated with an old text from the Vedic tradition "In the beginning was the Lord of Creatures; second to him was the Word. The Word was verily Brahman." In one of his other books the swami declares in this connection: "Of course, I am not of the opinion that John

[47] Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, p. 42.

translated from the Vedas! But it indicates the universality of truth."[48]

The image of Christ that emerges in his books is thus strongly determined by Hindu tradition. Typical is his treatment of the word of Jesus "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). It is precisely this text that has been quoted regularly by Christian theologians in order to underscore Christianity's exclusive message of salvation. Swami Prabhavananda cites many texts from the sacred literature of India where Krishna and the Buddha say similar things. How is it possible that all these divine teachers regard themselves as the only way to God? The swami's answer is that these teachers do not mean their ego, their lower self, when saying "I" or "me," as ordinary people would do. On the contrary, the "I" refers to the divinity that is present in all these teachers. Prabhavananda continues:

> They are telling us that the Father, the Godhead, is reached through the grace of the Son, the Incarnation. To the Hindus, the statements of these avatars are not contradictory .... Therefore the Hindu accepts all the great Sons of God who are worshiped in different religions.[49]

In Prabhavananda's treatise, Jesus is again, obviously, an incarnation of God. He fits into the series of *avataras* acknowledged by Hinduism. Prabhavananda also quotes the famous text from the Bhagavad-Gita, in which Krishna declares that he descends to earth whenever *dharma* declines. In his view, the reason for Jesus' coming was the degeneration of the Jewish religion. In such a situation there must be an incarnation of God on earth to bring a new spiritual *elan*. While other human beings are born under the influence of their karma, this ap-

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[48] Prabhavananda, *Religion in Practice*, p. 211. Cf. his *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, p. 42. To underscore the universality, the Sanskrit verses are repeatedly adjusted to be in line with the biblical concepts. This text literally reads: "In the beginning was Prajapati [the Lord of the Creatures], from whom the Word was as second." It is then related how Prajapati has sexual intercourse with Lady Word and impregnates her. The text is from the Black Yajur-Veda, Kathaka 12:5.

[49] Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, pp. 43-44.

pearance was a voluntary initiative on the part of God. The birth of Christ is thus different from the births of others. Prabhavananda sees that distinction in Jesus' saying to those around him: "You are from below; I am from above" (John 8:23).[50]

For both Akhilananda and Prabhavananda, however, it is what this incarnation has to teach that is the most important. They are convinced that the words of Christ have not lost any relevance in twenty centuries and find it difficult to understand why Christians sometimes make relativistic remarks about the Gospel being a product of its age. The message of an *avatara* must have value for all ages.

Both see the core of Jesus' preaching as an appeal to follow a spiritual method that makes perfection attainable. Both swamis emphasize that this perfection can be reached within this life. It has nothing to do with a perspective after death but with a way in life that can be travelled. Relevant in this respect is the text "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).[51] It is startling that this text receives such a central place, since in Christian theology and spirituality the text is usually a matter of embarrassment. From a Hindu background, however, the text can articulate a clear message. Prabhavananda adds that the goal of every religion is to pursue perfection, that is: to realize God. To Akhilananda, this is exactly what Jesus meant in urging others to seek the Kingdom of God. The state of perfection is attainable. A human being can see God if he makes the proper effort.

It is primarily Akhilananda who has an eye also for the distinctions between Hinduism and Christian faith, as well as between the different schools within Christianity. On the one hand, he applauds Christian orthodoxy with respect to the divinity of Christ. On the other hand, he resists vehemently the "neo-orthodoxy" of the Barthians, because of his interpretation of Jesus' teaching. The swami finds the notion central to the theology of Karl Barth that human beings cannot acquire

[50] Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, p. 46.

[51] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, pp. 168, 64; Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, p. 69.

knowledge of God through their own effort extremely astonishing. He holds that such a theology takes away all incentive for spiritual practice: Why should one still pray, meditate or uphold morals? More fundamentally, in his view, such theology is absurd in the face of the teachings of Jesus who urges people to develop their spirituality. The argument that Akhilananda adds from his psychological background is rather clever: one cannot love someone one does not know. Or, stated more formally: love presupposes a certain form of knowledge of the object of love. If Jesus urges us to love God, some knowledge of God must be within the human being's reach.[52]

Such a proclamation of love is remarkably congruous with the Hindu *bhakti* movement. Both authors agree upon that similarity. It is precisely in Jesus' appeal to love that it becomes clear that he was an Oriental. Swami Vivekananda had already explained this to his American audience. But he had also made critical comments on certain elements in Jesus' teachings that he found too simple or too egoistic. Thus certain parts of the Sermon on the Mount could not arouse much enthusiasm in the first Hindu preacher in the West. The Golden Rule and the Lord's Prayer arouse particular ire. The sympathetic Christmas address by Swami Ranganathananda already demonstrated that later monks in the Order have a more positive view, and it is this line that is continued in Prabhavananda's book. His complete exposition is based on the Sermon on the Mount. He discusses extensively the Lord's Prayer, which he calls both simple and profound. The Golden Rule, too, is given supreme importance. He considers this rule to be common to all the major religions. And he thinks that he has discovered the same teaching in the Mahabharata.[53]

Swami Akhilananda and Swami Prabhavananda have both studied seriously the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Their

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[52] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, pp. 49-52.

[53] Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, p. 117. The quotations from the Indian epic, however, are adjusted to suit the occasion. The negative version occurs twice in the epic: "Do not do to another what is disagreeable to yourself: this is the summary Law" (MBh. V:39:57; cf. MBh. XI:113:8). But the epic does not contain the positive version found in the Gospel: "do to others what you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

books demonstrate that the person of Jesus can become recognizable to Hindus and that much of what he said may inspire Hindus as well. The careful way in which both authors acquainted themselves with another religious tradition commands respect. It must be said, however, that there is one aspect of Christology that they find most difficult to appreciate: they pay hardly any attention to the suffering of Jesus and his resurrection. And the significance attached by Christian theology to these events leaves them cold. Prabhavananda almost ignores the subject, and Akhilananda describes Jesus as an Indian *avatara* when he states that he "left the world cheerfully like a great hero."[54] A psychological lesson can certainly be derived from the passion: the cross teaches us that aggression is not the way to solve problems. But a Christian would not regard that as the core of the kerygma. Similarly, the resurrection is interpreted as a metaphor: the true "spirit of Easter" is that people may overcome the limitations of the corruptible life in this world. In connection with death and resurrection, both Akhilananda and Prabhavananda refer to the Shvetashvatara Upanishad.[55] In this small book of Hindu wisdom the doctrine of the knowledge of Brahman through which one can attain immortality is unfolded. The bondage of the soul to the wheel of rebirth is broken through true insight. But here we are on totally different ground compared with the Christian interpretation of Easter.

Assessments by Christian theologians, particularly with reference to Akhilananda, always point to this fundamentally different interpretation of the cross and resurrection. Samartha calls it a treatment in symbolic terms that is out of harmony with the basic tone of the New Testament and the faith of the church through the ages.[56] Wolff criticizes Akhilananda's approach in general as a theology of projection in which the historical facts of the Gospel are projected onto a concept of reli-

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[54] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 17.

[55] Akhilananda, *Hindu View of Christ*, p. 217 (quotes Shvetashvatara Upanishad III:8); Prabhavananda, *The Sermon on the Mount according to Vedanta*, pp. 95-96 (paraphrases Shvetashvatara Upanishad I:6).

[56] Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, p. 72.

gion that has been imported from Hinduism.[57] Barlage, who is most sympathetic towards Akhilananda, nevertheless reproaches him for not showing any empathy for the Christian understanding of Christ.[58] Each critic certainly acknowledges the sincerity and the friendly attitude of Akhilananda's style of writing about Christianity, but it must be asked if a more positive evaluation of the Christological tradition in the Ramakrishna Movement, of which Akhilananda is such a clear advocate, might not be possible.

A Stimulus for Dialogue

Ramakrishna and his followers have had an immense influence both in India and the West. The Movement, as it was shaped by Swami Vivekananda, reveals a new self-awareness on the part of Hindus. The new presentation of Hinduism included a response to the challenge that Christian belief and Western civilization posed to India. While many traditional Hindu schools barricaded themselves in isolation, the Ramakrishna Movement sought dialogue.

In the course of time a certain image of Jesus arose in the Movement, for which Ramakrishna's mystical inspiration was the starting point. Through his visions and other spiritual experiences Ramakrishna was convinced that all religions must be regarded as paths to the same goal and fervently propagated this conviction among his students. It has been insufficiently recognized that, in the context of his age, Ramakrishna's approach meant a new opening in the relationship between the religions. The message of the missionaries and the culture of the colonial powers were usually encountered by strong rejection. This was true for both traditional Hindu circles and reform movements.[59] The Arya Samaj is the most striking example of

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[57] Wolff, *Christus unter den Hindus*, p. 205.

[58] Barlage, *Christ Saviour of Mankind*, p. 234.

[59] Interesting material on Hindu apologetics can be found in Richard Fox Young, *Resistant Hinduism: Sanskrit Sources on Anti-Christian Apologetics in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Vienna: University of Vienna, 1981).

the latter: its founder, Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, regularly criticized "the false prophet Jesus" maliciously.[60]

Of course, the urban elite of Kolkatta was also influenced by the liberal Brahmo Samaj. But for this movement, founded by Raja Rammohan Roy, the teachings of Jesus, primarily with respect to ethics were more central than the religious aspects. Ramakrishna was one of the first Hindus to see the Christian religion as a way to God, equal in value to other ways. In his view, Jesus was primarily the perfect mystic who had realized God in his own existence. As a yoga master, he taught his disciples to reach the same spiritual heights.

Swami Vivekananda continued on the course that Ramakrishna had begun but stressed more Jesus' renunciation of the world. Thus, he saw Christ as a monk who brought a message that only other monks could understand. Vivekananda connects Jesus explicitly with the Hindu tradition of spirituality, asceticism, and world renunciation: he becomes a *sannyasin*. Because Vivekananda's knowledge of the Bible was much more extended than his master's, diverse texts and images from the New Testament could be included in the Christology of the Ramakrishna Movement. In particular, the prologue of the gospel of John became a fixed reference text regarding the divinity of Christ. Jesus was invariably seen as an incarnation of God in line with the model of the Hindu *avatara* doctrine.

In later times, some leading monks of the Ramakrishna Movement developed these initial Christological notions. It is striking that all studied the Bible and Christian theology with much respect and sincere interest. All agree that Jesus must be regarded as no less than an incarnation of God. In the usual series of *avataras* he receives a definite place after Rama, Krishna and Gautama Buddha and before Chaitanya and Ramakrishna. With respect to the teachings of Christ, the Sermon on the Mount became prominent: it teaches human beings to be perfect following the model of God. The practical, moral aspects of Jesus' preaching, underestimated by Vivekananda, receive a more important place.

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[60] J.T.F. Jordens, "Dayananda Sarasvati's Interpretation of Christianity," in: A. Sharma, *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp. 120-42; Wolff, *Christus unter den Hindus*, pp. 106-25.

The two leaders of the movement in America, Akhilananda and Prabhavananda, deserve the honour of having engaged themselves most profoundly with the meaning of Christ. The first was oriented more towards spiritual and moral practice and the other more towards the similarities with the Hindu scriptures. Both have become important partners in dialogue.

Unfortunately, the Christian side has not always taken sufficient notice of the statements by these Hindu theologians. The undeniable one-sided statements and weaknesses, such as the weak understanding of Jesus' suffering, have often influenced Christian reaction too much. But, the Hindus have also highlighted some aspects that have been generally neglected in Christian theology. Conspicuous in the Hindu writers in the first place is their attention to Jesus' spirituality. His urging of others to perfection, which forms a stumbling block in Christian theology, appears to find its natural place in Hindu reflections. The practical ethics of the Sermon on the Mount, although likewise brought into prominence in certain Christian circles, appears to appeal to Hindus. That raises the question if Christians have always sufficiently recognized the universal significance of this teaching. Finally, the Hindu arguments should be taken seriously when the issue of the divinity of Christ is discussed. Their familiarity with the idea that God descends to earth in order to foster righteousness could also be inspiring to Christians.

CHAPTER 6

Jesus the *Avatara*

Vengal Chakkarai

Among Christian theologians in the nineteenth century, we find merely initial attempts at an actual Indian expression of faith. Theologians such as Nehemiah Goreh made some cautious attempts to use concepts from the Hindu world as illustrations in their Christian theology, but the time was certainly not ripe for a true inculturation of the Gospel. The church on the Indian subcontinent was ruled by the European missionaries and civil servants, most of whom were extremely dismissive of the influences of other religions. These missionaries and civil servants felt no affinity for Hinduism: Hindu converts were expected to make a complete break with their past.

But that view shifted drastically in the first half of the twentieth century. The Indian political independence movement was accompanied by a renewed cultural self-consciousness, which constituted a particular problem for Indian Christians. Up until then most had completely adjusted to the spirituality and the church culture of the Europeans. As a rule, Indian Christians had derived a sense of self-esteem from the fact that, as Christians, they—more so than their own people—shared in the world of the colonial rulers. But now, within a short time, that world had become suspect among the people. Joining the Europeans in their European religious perceptions was no longer something of which to be proud.

Indian Christians developed a strong need to profile themselves within the church as Indians and at the same time join society as Christians loyal to the struggle for independence and renewed cultural self-consciousness. For the first time, Indian Christians wanted to be Indians and that would become apparent in their theology as well. Up to that point theological thought was dominated by Europe: the style of doing theology was completely European and the concepts and the argumentation were imported from there. But an authentic Indian theology was formed within a few decades. A number of theolo-

gians in the various Protestant churches expressed the Christian faith in a new way, in relation to their Hindu environment. For the time being, the Roman Catholics did not participate in this attempt to catch up in the area of inculturation, but the Protestants spoke up in no uncertain terms.

When the World Mission Conference was held in India in 1938, it became clear to the entire world that this host country had developed its own theology.[1] But not everyone was won over in mission circles. The preparations for this World Mission Conference were strongly determined by Hendrik Kraemer's *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, which had been written especially for the conference. This book argued for an exclusive Christology, strongly influenced by the dialectical theology of Karl Barth and his followers, who left no room for contributions from other religions. In contrast, a group of theologians from India presented a completely different approach to the Christian message, based on their experiences with life in a non-Christian environment. This group is usually called the "Rethinking Christianity" group, after the title of their collection of articles *Rethinking Christianity in India*. When the conference assembled in December 1938 in Tambaram, south of Madras, the positions were directly opposed to each other. European theology no longer seemed to touch base in India, but the Indian alternative was unacceptable to the Western delegates for the most part. For the first time there was a gap between East and West within the same Protestant denominations.

The most prominent members of the "Rethinking Christianity" group were the theologian A.J. Appasamy and the lawyers P. Chenchiah and V. Chakkarai. In the decades prior, all three had been intensely involved in a new Indian approach to the Christian faith. All three wanted to experience their faith in Christ in terms of their Hindu background, without denying what had been dear to their ancestors. As an Anglican clergyman and later even as a bishop, Appasamy was interested in

[1] See Jan van Lin, *Shaking the Fundamentals: Religious Plurality and Ecumenical Movement*, Church and Theology in Context, vol. 36 (Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 158-211. Cf. H.L. Richard, "Rethinking 'Rethinking'," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 19 (2002) 3: 7-17.

the development of a spirituality that could make the church in India more attractive. He saw a important place for the Hindu *bhakti* tradition in which the loving surrender to God is central. Chenchiah was, in more than one respect, the most radical of the three. He had little connection with church life, and did not expect much from building up the church in a Hindu environment. He was concerned with "the raw fact of Christ," the experience of Christ that Hindus could share with Christians. The most systematic thinker in the "Rethinking Christianity" group was Chakkarai, who wanted to demonstrate through extensive treatises how Christian faith can be expressed in completely Indian—and thus Hindu—concepts. His contribution to theology in India has had an extraordinary influence on both Christians and people with a Hindu background who were interested in the Christian faith.

In 1926 Chakkari published the book that would make him famous. The title itself was already programmatic: *Jesus the Avatar*. Obviously, he wanted to present a Christology in terminology borrowed from Hinduism, where Jesus could be described as an *avatara*, a descent of God of which Hindu mythology has so many examples. Moreover, the title suggested that Jesus should not so much be regarded as one of many *avataras* but as an exemplary *avatara*. In the 1920s this was a provocative remark, not only for Christians but also for Hindus.

Chakkarai was concerned with the inculturation of the Christian faith—or what he himself called, the "Indianisation of Christianity." It had to be possible to express the biblical message and the doctrines of the church in such a way that people with a Hindu background would be directly moved by it. Chakkarai was not concerned with syncretism: he continued to be mindful of the differences between the Hindu and Christian religions and a combination of both religions left him cold. These motives reveal something of the biography of the writer. He himself came from a Hindu family and felt an affinity for his ancestral religion and culture. Nonetheless, as a student he had chosen for the Christian faith. It was important for him to defend that choice again and again and thereby demonstrate that faith in Christ did not need to become absorbed by European philosophical frameworks and church culture.

Vengal Chakkarai Chettiar was born in 1880 as the son of a banker in Madras. The family belonged to the *chetti* caste, which is directly below the brahmanic in the caste hierarchy. His family was religious, and participation in the temple cult and other rituals was valued highly. As in many families in an urban environment, different strands of Hinduism existed side by side in the family. His father was an adherent of the monistic Vedanta doctrine, while his mother was inspired primarily by the Vishnu *bhakti*. As a child, Chakkarai regularly visited the Kali temple in Madras. There he developed a special devotion for the heroic god Murugan, the young warrior so popular among Tamils. However, at school he encountered a completely different religious influence. Like many other children of the elite of the city, he was sent to a mission school, for a Christian education was known to be the best. After the Scottish Mission School, he attended the high school affiliated with Madras Christian College and then studied philosophy at that same college.

At first Chakkarai rejected the Bible lessons and the Christian culture that surrounded him at school, but during his study of philosophy he became fascinated by the figure of Christ. The rector, William Miller, paid a great deal of attention to him in his religious search and taught him how to focus his attention on Jesus Christ without rejecting Hindu values. In contrast to many in his circles, Chakkarai wanted not only to familiarize himself with Christ but also to devote himself explicitly to him. He explained that in the tolerant Hindu culture in particular it was no sacrifice to acknowledge Jesus Christ in word and deed as teacher or even as the perfect incarnation of God. That would not be strange, but "if the disciple is called upon to give a signal proof of his loyalty to his Master, it is not enough to confess Him orally or by good conduct before men, he should submit to the rite of Baptism."[2] And thus, at twenty-three years of age, Chakkarai was baptized when he did confession of faith in the chapel of Madras Christian College, thereby becoming a member of the Free Church of Scotland.

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[2] In a 1915 article, "Why I am a Christian"; see V. Chakkarai, *Vengal Chakkarai*, vol. I, ed. P.T. Thomas (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1981), p. 4.

After his studies Chakkarai taught for a number of years while studying law. Subsequently, he worked for some time as a lawyer but did not find the work satisfying. In 1913 he joined the Danish Mission in Madras, where he presided over a Christian reading room. Thus for almost twenty years he worked in missions, spreading the Gospel among intellectuals. But missionary work was not the only thing to which he devoted himself. As a young man, he had been captivated by the Indian independence movement. He was a great champion of Gandhi's peaceful resistance. As a Christian socialist, he also put his time and energy into the emerging trade union in Madras. It is no wonder then that he ultimately chose for a political career, holding a number of important positions: he was mayor of the city of Madras, a member of the Legislative Assembly of the state of Madras and chairman of the All India Trade Union Congress. Chakkarai died in 1957.

Chakkarai published a great deal, especially in the form of articles. For many years he edited his own weekly, *The Christian Patriot*, and also contributed regularly to another periodical in Madras, the *Guardian*. Chakkarai writes in a classic British style, arguing in a broad way in ornate prose. His articles testify to his being a widely-read man with a good knowledge of philosophy and theology. He was familiar with the Indian philosophical classics as well as the modern European thinkers. He was well-informed about the theological debate in India and in the West. He entered into the discussion at the time between C.F. Andrews and J.N. Farquhar on whether or not Jesus' words on non-violence had a Buddhist background. But he also became involved in the debate on Life of Jesus research in response to writings by Albert Schweitzer.

Chakkarai's most famous book is *Jesus the Avatar*, which was published in Madras at the end of 1926 (the cover of the first print gives 1927). It was followed a number of years later, in 1932, by *The Cross and Indian Thought*, which had much less influence. Both books are revisions of series of articles that originally appeared in his own magazine *The Christian Patriot*. The first book received a great deal of attention from Indian Christians as well as in the circles of European missionaries. A Danish translation even appeared in 1928, no doubt due to Chakkarai's connection with the Danish Mission Society.

Chakkarai's goal in *Jesus the Avatar* is to describe Jesus Christ using Hindu concepts. For this Indian Christology, he does not select any single direction in Hinduism other than, for example, the *bhakti* theologian Appasamy. Like a true eclectic, Chakkarai adopts whatever suits him from all strands, as a result of which the concepts are detached from their original context. Thus, when he uses a certain Hindu term, he does not attach any related system of conviction and argumentation to its use. But the terms employed always have a certain meaning, of course, that accompanies them into the new Christian framework, a process that can be experienced as either enriching or alienating. A small example can clarify this. A typical formulation for Chakkarai is offered by the following sentence on the continuing presence of Christ: "as Christian *anubhava* and *shruti* have agreed in emphasizing, the Lord, Jesus, the Galilean, is still with us."[3] *Shruti* is used here for "Holy Scriptures" and *anubhava* means "experience of faith." Both terms will sound familiar to the ears of the Indian reader, and that is of course the intention. At first glance, there does not appear to be any objection to using this terminology. After all, *shruti* is a standard Hindu expression for inspired books and has a strong connotation of holiness, and *anubhava* is a term often used in connection with the spirituality of Hinduism. And yet the terms evoke questions in a Christian context. *Shruti* was originally used for the holy Vedic writings, which are seen as revelation without any human intervention. The word means "heard" and contrasts with the (also inspired) scriptures in which a human hand can be recognized and is therefore called "remembered" (*smriti*). When *shruti* is used to refer to the Bible, it immediately evokes a concept of extremely mechanical revelation that appears to make it impossible to perceive any human participation in the production of the book: *shruti* is simply heard directly from heaven. The term *anubhava* also has its own connotation: the word refers in Hinduism to a mystical experience that is usually brought about by systematic human efforts. Although *anubhava* can also be understood in the *bhakti* sphere as the result of divine mercy, the word still evokes the image of

[3] V. Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, in: *Vengal Chakkarai*, vol. I, p. 181.

the ascetic who appropriates magical power rather than a receptive believer.

Chakkarai was very conscious of the fact that, by using Indian ideas, he was paving new roads that would not meet the approval of everyone. At the beginning of his second book, he reviews the effect of *Jesus the Avatar*, writing that there he wanted to use "the resources of Indian thought and the heritage of the Indian religions" and that his goal was "to find a fuller explication of the Incarnation in terms of Indian thought."[4] Chakkarai did not want to present an uncritical comparison of various religious traditions but to enrich Christology by the use of the Indian religious tradition—thus not syncretism but "Indianization" or inculturation.

This is Chakkarai's starting point for his Christological project. This part of the Christian doctrine is of great importance to him: he has a very Christocentric view of the Christian religion. It was, after all, the image of Christ that had intrigued him as a Hindu. He had known about religion before becoming acquainted with the Gospel, but the link with Christ showed everything in a completely different light. In his book Chakkarai goes back repeatedly to his first experiences on the path towards the Christian faith. He became fascinated by the person of Jesus Christ because of his simultaneous exaltation and nearness, because of the transcendent mystery of his being. In his experience, one has a different relationship with God through Jesus. Chakkarai writes, with a fine turn of phrase: "The most outstanding feature of Christian experience is that we can no more think of God without Jesus Christ than we can think of Jesus Christ without God."[5]

Chakkarai is convinced that in India especially people are capable of comprehending something of the secret of Christ. Only someone who is familiar with mysticism can be aware of how the presence of God is illuminated through Jesus Christ. And only someone who is familiar with the Eastern way of transferring knowledge can understand Jesus' relationship with his disciples. Jesus' prayer life can also be clarified against an

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[4] V. Chakkarai, *The Cross and Indian Thought*, in: *Vengal Chakkarai*, vol. I, p. 199.

[5] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 158.

Indian background: it is a kind of yoga. Chakkarai lashes out rather fiercely at European theologians who continue to remain stuck on appearances and overlook the essentials. He suggested strongly to such an author that he might have understood better if he had spent some time in the East with a guru.[6] Apparently, the truth of Christ reveals itself better in Eastern concepts.

Thus the central concept in Chakkarai's Christology is *avatara*. In Hinduism this term refers to a divine figure who mercifully descends to the world and brings salvation to humans.[7] Hinduism contains many myths about *avataras*, and in some schools an entire theological system has arisen. Vaishnavism has a taxonomy of a dozen *avataras* who appear on earth over the course of cosmic history. Again and again, it is Vishnu who, in continually new form, descends to humans to combat evil. The famous text in the Bhagavad-Gita that is the proof text *par excellence* of this system, states: "For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evildoers, for the setting up of the law of righteousness I come into being age after age" (Bhagavad-Gita 4:8).[8] Rama and Krishna in particular have received a prominent place in this series of divine descents. The very extensive myths about these *avataras* are linked to an intensive cultus that is central for many Hindus of the Vaishnava school. But there are stories of *avataras* in other parts of the Hindu world as well. Because of his background, Chakkarai was especially familiar with the myths that deal with the way in which Shiva revealed himself to pious believers in the country of the Tamils. These instances are more theophanies of short duration than incarnations living among humans, as is the case with Rama and Krishna, but the term *avatara* is used: it is none less than God who appears on earth.

Thus it is also clear why Chakkarai attaches so much importance to the concept of *avatara*. The appearance of Jesus Christ is nothing less than God's presence on earth, and no con-

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[6] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 169; directed at T.R. Glover.

[7] On the term *avatara* see Geoffrey Parrinder, *Avatar and Incarnation: The Wilde Lectures in Natural and Comparative Religion in the University of Oxford* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970).

[8] R.C. Zaehner (ed., transl.), *The Bhagavad-Gita* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 184.

cept is better suited to establishing that than the Hindu *avatara*. It is characteristic of Chakkarai that he opposes European theologians who searching for "the historical Jesus" and find nothing more than an ordinary person, a prosaic figure like nearest village preacher, as Chakkarai writes. And he continues bitingly:

> The Lord said that men do not gather figs of thorns; nor can they create the Founder of Christianity, such as He has been in human history, out of a dry and dreary moral reformer preaching the commonplaces of religions. Jesus of history is to us the *Avatar* of God.[9]

Hinduism has an affinity for the divinity that manifests itself on earth. That is why we find in India especially terms that approach the secret of the incarnation. This is the surplus value of the use of this terminology: it is enriching to portray Christ in this way. But one should also ask what less appropriate meanings are included in such a concept. Chakkarai is certainly aware of this. The examples especially from Tamil literature on the theophanies of Shiva often speak of a quick manifestation of the deity, which hardly allows one to speak of a true incarnation. Shiva assumes human form for an instant but does not take part in human life with all its attendant emotions. Chakkarai also sees Rama and Krishna as temporary forms that fulfil a certain task on earth and then disappear again. He regards this as a fundamental difference from the Christian faith: "Rama and Krishna were temporary and passed away, the Christian view that we are describing is that it is abiding and permanent. The Spirit of Jesus is incarnated again and again in human hearts."[10]

Here Chakkarai appears to be reacting more to the *Shaiva* mythology of his own Tamil background than to the Krishna mysticism in northern India, where the continual involvement of believers with the *avatar*a is experienced much more intensely. For the ordinary Krishna *bhakta* in Bengal or Vraj, Krishna is not a figure of the past but a living deity who still manifests his presence. But it is important that Chakkarai shows that he is not

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[9] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 120-21.

[10] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 136.

willing to adopt concepts in their entirety from another religion uncritically. Calling Jesus *avatara* says something new about Jesus, but at the same time the concept of *avatara* also receives a new meaning when applied to Jesus. Jesus is seen in a new way when we see him as *avatara*. But Jesus is also not an *avatara* in exactly the same way as the other *avataras* that were already known. This inculturation process demonstrates double transformation, as Martien Brinkman has recently demonstrated on the basis of many examples from intercultural theology.[11]

Thus, Chakkarai felt forced to adjust the concept *avatara* in order to be able to describe Jesus Christ. If Jesus is an *avatara*, then an *avatara* must also be able to have a more permanent character than is usually the case in the Hindu tradition. Jesus Christ cannot be described as a brief appearance, a theophany of a temporary nature. Here we touch upon the core of Chakkarai's Indian Christology. The experience of the living Christ now is more important than the historical appearance of Jesus in his doctrine and life and his suffering and dying. This is how Chakkarai experienced the importance of Jesus as a student. For him, it was not natural to see this figure from another continent as the ultimate manifestation of God. Even after his baptism he still wrestled with the issue of how he, as an Indian, should now worship a Europeanized Jew. But in the end he can discard all Western depictions, for he experiences the closeness of this Jesus: he finds him in his heart.[12]

Chakkarai describes the importance of Christ by means of a typically Indian approach. The result for his theology is that the working of the Holy Spirit is given a very central place. He himself makes this connection as well when he writes: "The orientation of Indian thought in respect of the Incarnation would be set on the Holy Spirit and the significance of His indwelling in human lives."[13] In India, religious experiences always ultimately concern the experience of the divine in the depth of one's own existence. That is how Chakkarai wants to under-

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[11] M.E. Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor or Healer?* transl. Henry and Lucy Jansen, Cross Cultural Theologies (London: Equinox, 2008), forthcoming.

[12] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 126.

[13] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 122.

stand Jesus: as the living one who continually manifests himself in humans. Christ and the Spirit more or less merge into each other. The Holy Spirit is Jesus Christ himself, who "incarnates" himself in humans and thus determines their lives.

Chakkarai can fall back on the Hindu tradition for this aspect of Christological thought as well. He calls the Spirit the *antaryamin*, the internal regulator. We find this term in the Upanishads as an indication of the working of the Brahman, the Supreme Reality, in human life (Mandukya Upanishad 6). It was the great philosopher Ramanuja (d. 1137) in particular who worked out this concept for describing the divine presence in a person: God is found in one's own inner self, and whoever discovers him discovers the guiding principle of life. In line with this, Chakkarai describes the working of the Spirit, which is nothing else than Jesus in people now. The importance of the historical Jesus fades here, for we should not look for Jesus "in the tomb of forgotten facts and ancient circumstances but in the inner recesses of the *atman*. This is the dominating challenge of Indian religious experience."[14]

Is there still something to be said about the direction in which the "internal regulator" leads us? What does it mean to find this figure of Christ as the guiding principle of one's own existence? Chakkarai also makes use here of concepts from his Hindu heritage. He sees Jesus Christ as an exemplary human, the model for being human. Already in the ancient Vedic writings one finds speculation on the mythological figure Purusha, who is "the human being," the original form of human life. Chakkarai links up with this tradition when he describes Jesus as the real human being, the ideal human being, or the human being in all humans. Using a Sanskrit term, he calls him the *Sat Purusha* (the true human being). He thus emphasizes the importance of the words and works of Jesus Christ. True human-

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[14] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 131. He would certainly agree the with what the Dutch poet and hymn writer, Huub Oosterhuis wrote "Niet in het graf van voorbij,/ niet in een tempel van dromen;/ hier in ons midden is Hij,/ hier in de schaduw der hoop." I.e.: "Not in the grave of yesterday,/ not in a temple of dreams;/ here is he in our midst,/ here in the shadow of hope." Cf. the Dutch Protestant hymnal, *Liedboek voor de kerken* ('s Gravenhage/Leeuwarden: Boekencentrum/Jongbloed), no. 325: 6.

ness, as God promised it, emerges in him: "He is the Man of Men, the Son of Man, the original pattern in the mind of God Himself after whom all men have been fashioned."[15] If it is then this Man of God who gives direction to the life of the believer, then humanity as God intended it becomes attainable. On this point Chakkarai has not given more than an initial stimulus for theologizing. Later Christian thinkers in India, particularly in the ashram movement, have made grateful use of this stimulus.

Chakkarai deserves credit for being one of the first to have constructed a truly Indian Christology, on which various theologians—both Protestant and Roman Catholic—later built. And even though not everyone would want to follow Chakkarai in all of his applications of the Hindu heritage, there is at present a general acknowledgement in India that the Christian message must be inculturated in a way similar to Chakkarai's attempt. In Chakkarai's day this was new, and not everyone in the churches was enthusiastic about such attempts at "Indianizing." It became apparent especially around the time of the World Mission Conference of Tambaram in 1938 how differently people thought about this point. The Western representatives who allowed themselves to be guided by Hendrik Kraemer's book with his categorical rejection of other religions could do nothing with the approach taken by Chakkarai and his friends. But even Indians who, with Chakkarai, supported the Gandhian independence movement could not always agree with an Indian theology. One of these was the first "native" bishop of the Anglican Church, V.S. Azariah, who had serious objections to the theology of the "Rethinking Christianity" group.[16] Resistance to the idea of distancing oneself from the familiar European church culture and the fear of allowing unorthodox elements to enter theology seemed to be strong motives. But the new episode of the Indian history that had already begun required a new theological consideration. There was increasing sympathy for an Indian expression of Christian belief, and Chakkarai had shown how it was possible in his *Jesus the Avatar*.

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[15] Chakkarai, *Jesus the Avatar*, p. 130.

[16] S.B. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge/Richmond: Eerdmans/Curzon Press, 2000), p. 207.

Frank Wesley

Describing Jesus as an *avatara* is one thing, but is it also possible to paint Jesus as an *avatara*? Vengal Chakkarai's characterization of Jesus Christ in the 1920s using Hindu terminology was new and many found it confrontational. But images are even more confrontational than words. The time was not yet ripe for applying the *avatara* concept to Jesus in art as well. Not that artists in India did not use Christian themes—on the contrary: many painters with a Hindu background took up the classic Christ themes from Western art history: his birth, healings, suffering and the crucifixion. But there was no attempt to link it to Hindu iconology. And painters in Christian circles were certainly not looking for such a visual inculturation, influenced as they were by a traditional ecclesiastical culture that looked to Europe for guidance.

It was not until after India's independence that artists came forward who consciously made use of Hindu stylistic devices to portray themes from the Christian faith. One of them portrays Jesus in a way that immediately evokes Chakkarai's theology: Jesus as *avatara*. The artist was Frank Wesley (1923-2002).

The Wesley family had been Christian for five generations already, and the artist grew up in an atmosphere in which the Christian faith was assumed. They were Methodists, and it was because of this specific background that Frank Wesley acquired a great interest in biblical history and the image of Christ. As an artist, however, he had not been trained within the Christian tradition. He studied at the famous Government Art School in Lucknow, where his most important teachers were Hindu and the classic Indian techniques and styles were central. Wesley subsequently studied in Japan for five years to familiarize himself with the Eastern Asian art traditions as well.

Frank Wesley made art based on many biblical themes in various techniques: water colours (Lucknow's specialty), oil paintings, miniatures and wooden carvings. He always sought Asian forms of expression in working with these themes. In his view, Jesus was not primarily the historical figure from the

country of Judea but the eternal Christ who was at home everywhere.

The painting here is called *Home in Nazareth*.[1] It is immediately apparent that this Nazareth looks very Asian. The perspective seems Japanese, as do the windows with their sunshades. The people, however, are full-blooded Indians, as are a number of other elements, such as the blossoming banana tree, the small niche and the shafts, which are obviously meant for an Indian oxcart. The artist does not wish to take those who see this painting out of their own world and to transport them to a first-century Galilean town. Rather, it brings the biblical episode to them: Nazareth is at home with them.

The painting is part of a series that Wesley made in 1962 on the birth and youth of Jesus. The paintings are small (this one measures 15 by 23 cm) and in the style of Indian miniatures like



[1] *Pelgrim in Gods Hand: De Indiase schilder Frank Wesley*, Missiezendingskalender 1996 (Amsterdam/Oegstgeest: NZR/NMR, 1995), May. See also G. Wheeler and L. Farrell, "The Religious Art of Frank Wesley," *Australian EJournal of Theology* 4 (http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_4/farrell. htm).

those made in Rajasthan. The paint used is also distempered via egg yolks. There is a continual attempt to capture some of the mystery of the incarnation with the help of elements from Indian iconology. “Home in Nazareth” clearly portrays this.

The most obvious element is the blue colour used to portray the young Jesus. This colour was chosen for a very clear reason. Blue is the colour of heaven and a prominent colour used for the body of one of the Hindu *avataras*, Krishna. Moreover, the forehead of the child is of a lighter colour. This is an indication of a holy, enlightened figure. When viewing this painting, a Hindu would without doubt think immediately of Krishna. It is not only the blue that evokes this association—Hindus honour Krishna especially in his manifestation as a child, as opposed to all other descended divinities. Of course, the young man Krishna, who stays among the shepherd girls as a flute-playing lover, and the older Krishna as charioteer on the battlefield and as divine teacher are also worshipped. But the little, playful Krishna (Balakrishna) is a very specific figure within Hindu spirituality.[2]

By using these images, Wesley shows that Jesus can be viewed as a descended divinity, in line with the model offered by Hindu *avataras*. And by portraying the child Jesus in this way, he reinforces this imagery. Jesus is not an ordinary person who ascended to spiritual heights after many years of preparation, like Gautama the Buddha. Nor is Jesus a person who was given a special position by God as an adult, as in an adoptionistic Christology. No, Wesley’s Jesus is completely God from the very first moment of his life, just like Krishna. This is actually an orthodox point of view, even though it is expressed in a Hindu way. And that is precisely the same as what Chakkarai argued in words.

The Christ in Frank Wesley’s paintings is not always an *avatara*—sometimes he seems to be more of a guru, a teacher. In any event, he has always his place in Indian society. This is visible in a very special way in the painting *Jesus in Benares*. The representation of Jesus is certainly not very accurate historically. He is depicted as a guru amongst Hindus arguing at the

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[2] See, e.g., Jan Peter Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten: Mystiek uit India voor westerse lezers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1996), pp. 70-74.

holiest place in India: the stairs on the banks of the river Ganges in Varanasi. But this makes it clear how very much at home Jesus is in Hindu India.



CHAPTER 7

The Suffering Christ as an Example

Mahatma Gandhi

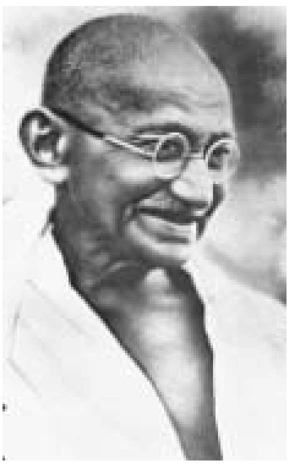
Whoever has seen Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* will not easily forget Gandhi's "non-violent" demonstration in front of the doors of a salt factory. They were demonstrating against the colonial government's monopoly on salt production. We see a huge crowd of Mahatma Gandhi's followers march toward the Dharasana Salt Works, a state enterprise, to occupy it. The men arrange themselves in orderly rows in front of the factory gates. There they are, face to face with a police force that is armed with *lathis*, wooden sticks with an iron tip. The demonstrators in the first row move forward and, without offering any resistance, allow themselves to be beaten. Women run toward them to carry away the badly wounded activists. Subsequently, the next row moves forward, and is also beaten down by the sticks. And so it continues.

The film shows the consequences of Gandhi's methodology of non-violent resistance: the demonstrators offer themselves as victims for their ideal and their determination and self-sacrifice produces a powerful effect. Onlookers cannot help but choose the side of those who dare to make such a sacrifice. The colonial power is exposed in all its cruelty and public opinion will lose all respect for the leaders who maintain their position in this way. This was precisely Gandhi's aim with such protests. But this cinematic representation of history clearly reveals just how high the price was.

Attenborough's film challenges the viewer. The bloody scenes of non-violent demonstration raise questions: Is the price justified? Is this the right way to achieve an ideal? And does the Gospel of Jesus Christ point to this type of activity? In any case, Mahatma Gandhi was convinced that the result of Christ's preaching could not be anything but acceptance of such a sacrifice. In his view the Gospel shows that there is no other way to achieve justice. How Gandhi, as the leader of the Indian inde-

pendence movement, deals with Christian values is the subject of this chapter.

The Bible in View



Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was born into a devout Hindu family. His parents belonged to the Modh Bania community, a caste that originally consisted of grocers. They were *vaishnavas*—devotees of the god Vishnu. Gandhi's mother was particularly devout: she came from a family that belonged to the *Pranami sampradaya*, a revival movement that arose in the seventeenth century within the Vaishnavistic tradition in which Vishnu is venerated in his incarnation as Krishna. The *pranamis* are characterized by a deep emotional devotion (*bhakti*),[1] together with a great tolerance of other groups and religions. More so than other Hindus, the *pranamis* are open to the religious experiences of other communities, holding that, ultimately, the same divine reality lies behind all conceptions of God. Even the holy books of Islam and Christianity are acknowledged to be revelations of the one God.

From this background it is not surprising that the family came into contact with followers of all possible Hindu and non-Hindu groups. Mohandas' mother felt it was her duty to visit the Krishna temple, the *haveli*, every day, either with or without her children. But young Mohandas was also at home in the temple of Rama, which was situated next to their home. When convenient, other temples, such as that of Shiva, were also attended, and Jain monks regularly came to visit the family. Moreover, the family had both Muslim and Parsi friends. The only ones Mohandas did not meet in his youth were Christians. He

[1] On *bhakti* piety in Hinduism see J.P. Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten: Mystiek uit India voor westerse lezers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1996) and J.P. Schouten, *Bhakti: Spiritualiteit in het hindoeïsme*, Wegwijs (Kampen: Kok, 2005).

had encountered only a couple of Christian street preachers, who disgusted him because they reviled the Hindus and their gods.

When Mohandas Gandhi was in England studying law, he could not avoid Christians. In those years (1888-1891) he studied the religion of the colonial powers for the first time. His autobiography gives the impression that it cost him a great deal to penetrate to the religion that he had come to know as a reprehensible culture. He had been greatly offended by the English in India and even more so by the Indian converts, because they ate meat and drank alcohol. In the area where Gandhi grew up Hinduism was characterized by strict vegetarianism and total abstinence.

Only at the end of the second year of his stay in London did he accept the challenge to become familiar with the religion of his environment. In a place that inspired confidence of him, a vegetarian restaurant, he met a man who began to talk to him about the Christian faith. Gandhi told him about his aversion to Christianity on the basis of his experiences with the lives Christians led in India. It struck him that his conversation partner distanced himself from his fellow believers and presented himself as a Christian vegetarian and teetotaller as a matter of principle. This representative of Christianity could inspire trust in the Hindu student. He invited Gandhi to read the Bible and offered him a copy.

Gandhi accepted the invitation and, radical as he was, put his mind to reading the entire Bible from beginning to end. But this *lectio continua* proved unsatisfying. He found the Old Testament boring; the book Numbers especially reawakened his disgust. But his attitude changed completely when he began reading the New Testament. He wrote years later in his autobiography: "The New Testament produced a different impression, especially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart."[2] He was particularly struck by Christ's command: "But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone

[2] M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or: The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, transl. from Gujarati (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1982), p. 58; originally published 1927.

wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well" (Matthew 5:39-40). Gandhi referred to this text many times in articles and speeches—it did indeed go to his heart.

Gandhi's fascination with the Sermon on the Mount has various aspects. In his first encounter with the content of the Bible, he was looking for a message that fit in with what his background had given him. Jesus' ethical instruction made him think of Hindu values that had a special meaning for him. In this connection he points in his autobiography to the Bhagavad-Gita, which he had also studied for the first time in London, as well as to a poem he had learned in his youth.

The similarity to this last text is the easiest to understand. It concerns a poem in the Gujarati by the *bhakti* poet Shamal Bhatt (1718-1765), which in translation reads:

> For a bowl of water give a goodly meal;
> For a kindly greeting bow thou down with zeal;
> For a simple penny pay thou back with gold;
> If thy life be rescued, life do not withhold.
> Thus the words and actions of the wise regard;
> Every little service tenfold they reward.
> But the truly noble know all men as one,
> And return with gladness good for evil done.[3]

The moral of this poem is clear: for all the good received, we should return more than we have received. The good deed of another deserves to be repaid in the plural. And even the evil that one receives from another must be parried by good. Clear similarities with biblical values should certainly be seen in the fourth and eighth sentences. One must not even wish to save his own life (cf. Matthew 10:39) and the evil of another must be repaid with good (cf. Matthew 5:39, 46-47; Romans 12:17, 20).

How the New Testament and the Sermon on the Mount in particular made Gandhi think of the doctrine of the Bhagavad-Gita is less clear. An important part of this is Krishna's summons to the warrior Arjuna not to avoid the war with his relatives but to do his duty by taking up arms. Arjuna is very hesitant to shed blood and, overwhelmed by sadness, he throws away his bow and arrows and calls out: "O let the sons of Dhri-

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[3] Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 30.

tarashtra, arms in hand, slay me in battle though I, unarmed myself, will offer no defence; therein were greater happiness for me" (Bhagavad-Gita 1:46).[4] One could compare Arjuna's attitude with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, but there is absolutely no echo of this attitude in the divine teacher in the Bhagavad-Gita. Krishna's message is unequivocal: one born as a warrior cannot avoid one's duty but must enter the battle and try to kill his opponent. Gandhi always explained the Bhagavad-Gita in such a way that Arjuna's battle is a metaphor for the spiritual tension required from a person in life. This battle must be waged out of duty and not be goal-oriented. The ethical core text of the book states: "Work alone is your proper business, never the fruits it may produce: let not your motive be the fruit of work nor your attachment to mere worklessness" (Bhagavad-Gita 2:47).[5] It concerns *nishkamakarma*, effort without a connection to the results. And exactly at this point Gandhi sees the agreement with the Sermon on the Mount. After all, Jesus also calls his disciples to choose a moral attitude, regardless of its effect on fellow human beings: "Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them"(Matthew 6:1). The concurrence between both religious traditions lies, according to Gandhi, in the renunciation to which the people are called.

But Gandhi is affected by the Sermon on the Mount not only because Jesus' instructions are the same as the ethics he knew from his Hindu background. Then the reading of this section of the Bible would not have made such a profound impression on him. It has also become his conviction that whoever ignores Jesus misses out on something. He very emphatically states that in a lecture he gave to students at a college in Ceylon. He told them that he regarded Jesus as one of the greatest teachers that the world has had and continued: "I shall say to the 75 per cent Hindus receiving instruction in this College that your lives will be incomplete unless you reverently study the teaching of Je-

[4] R.C. Zaehner (ed., transl.), *The Bhagavad-Gita* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 119.

[5] Zaehner, *The Bhagavad-Gita*, p. 145.

sus."[6] In his younger years Gandhi also seriously considered converting to Christianity. What attracted him, understandably, was not the life of the church but, as he said:

> the gentle figure of Christ, so patient, so kind, so loving, so full of forgiveness that he taught His followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek—I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man.[7]

Mahatma Gandhi is one of a long line of Hindu thinkers who feels affected by Jesus Christ's ethical instructions and refers particularly to the Sermon on the Mount on this point. Already in 1820 the Hindu reformer Raja Rammohan Roy wrote about the doctrine of Jesus and placed the Sermon on the Mount in the forefront.[8] It was also Rammohan who caused a great stir with his claim that Jesus belongs more to the Indian people than to Europeans because he was himself Asian.[9] We find echoes of this in Gandhi as well when he accuses the Christian church of twisting Christ's message: "He was an Asiatic whose message was delivered through many media and when it had the backing of a Roman Emperor it became an imperialist faith as it remains to this day."[10] But Gandhi does more than pass on the message of an Asian teacher with whom he feels

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[6] M.K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XXXV (Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1958-1984), p. 343 (speech at Central College, Jaffna, 29-11-1927). This text is often cited partially, thus acquiring the nature of a general call to the Hindu population of India. However, that does no justice to the context.

[7] From a conversation with a Christian sympathizer in South Africa, Millie Graham Polak, cited by her. Cf. M.G. Polak, *Mr. Gandhi: The Man* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), p. 40.

[8] Rammohan Roy, *The Precepts of Jesus: The Guide to Peace and Happiness. Extracted from the Books of the New Testament Ascribed to the Four Evangelists, with Translations into Sungscrit and Bengalee*, in: Rammohan Roy, *The English Works of Rammohun Roy*, vol. III (New Delhi: Cosmo Publications, 1982), pp. 481-543. See chapter 2 of this book for a discussion of Rammohan Roy.

[9] Roy, *The English Works of Raja Rammohun Roy*, vol. IV, p. 906.

[10] Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. LXII, p. 388 (*Harijan* 30-5-1936).

some affinity. He also shows signs of having been deeply affected by the person of Christ, who expressed his teachings in his life as well. More so than the Hindu philosophers who preceded him, Gandhi can thus also attach great meaning to the suffering and dying of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ and Him Crucified

When Gandhi's influence had reached its peak in the 1940s, the centre of his movement was in the Sevagram ashram near Wardha. The Mahatma (great soul), as he was generally called by then, lived in a simple hut there, and in that hut there was only one print on the wall, one of Jesus kneeling in Gethsemane, called *He is our Peace* (Ephesians 2:14). Gandhi had been given the print by one of his most prominent followers, a Christian woman of noble ancestry, Rajkumari (Princess) Amrit Kaur. It was a fitting gift, for the Mahatma was particularly touched by this representation of the suffering Christ.

Gandhi had to formulate his own understanding of the suffering of Christ for the first time when he was working in South Africa (1893-1914). Much more than during his studies in London, he was in contact during this time with church communities and individual Christians whom he encountered among the Indian contract labourers in Natal and their descendants on whose behalf he worked. He found a great deal of support among the Christian youth especially for organizing a protest against the political discrimination against Indians. But both in Natal and Transvaal he also came into contact with idealistic white Christians who were not hampered by racial prejudices. They were often from an evangelical background and, faithful to their principles, they were constantly attempting to convert the young lawyer to Christianity. Gandhi received invitations for prayer meetings, church services and open days, which he usually accepted. Moreover, he was generously supplied with theological literature, which he studied with interest.

Because his Christian acquaintances had such a positive attitude towards his political protests, Gandhi felt called to examine their faith seriously. But he could not feel at home in the religious experience of groups such as the Plymouth Brethren (Darbists) and the Methodists. Although he maintained contact with them, he was bothered by the call from these groups for

him to convert. Already at the first prayer meeting to which he was invited, prayers were said for the new brother "that the Lord Jesus who has redeemed us will also redeem him."[11] The doctrine of reconciliation on which this prayer was based did not appeal to Gandhi at all on the whole. He writes that his reason held him back from believing that Jesus had paid for the sins of the world through his blood. He resists, in particular, the unicity of Christ that emerges from such a doctrine and refuses to accept that Jesus is the only incarnation of God and that only those who believe in him will have eternal life. Already in the 1930s Sevenster concluded: "Orthodox-Protestant Christianity and Gandhi are diametrically opposed to one another with regard to their notions of Jesus."[12]

It is remarkable that his contact with orthodox Christians did influence Gandhi to some extent with regard to his *experience* of the crucified Jesus. Certain hymns and images have become dear to him and meant a great deal to him throughout his life. The well-known hymn by Isaac Watts, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," became his favourite hymn more or less: it was this hymn about Jesus on the cross, so beloved by many orthodox Protestants, that inspired him in his campaign for a new independent Indian society. One of the Mahatma's methods was to go on a hunger strike to focus attention on a problem or to emphasize the importance of certain demands, holding a total of thirty-two such "fasts" in his life. With the most important hunger strikes, when he was even prepared to go on even though it would mean his life, a certain identification with the suffering Christ played a role more than once. In 1924 he fasted for 21 days, only drinking salted water, with the goal of breaking the enmity between the Muslims and the Hindus. When he ended his fast after three weeks, completely weakened, he held a modest interreligious celebration. At the start an *imam* was asked to recite the opening *sura* of the Qur'an, and the conclusion was a Hindu recital and song. But in between the Mahatma wanted his friend, Charles Andrews, a Christian

[11] Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, p. 102.

[12] J.N. Sevenster, *Gandhi en het Christendom* (Haarlem: F. Bohn, 1934), pp. 139-40. There is some "spiritual affinity" for liberal Protestantism, according to Sevenster, p. 148.

missionary, to sing the hymn that Gandhi called his "favourite Christian song." It was Watts' hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." The lines that spoke in particular to Gandhi were:

> Love so amazing, so divine,
> demands my soul, my life, my all.[13]

A similar ritual was celebrated at the end of his last fast.[14] The connection between this type of protest and the orientation to the cross of Christ was clarified by a conversation that the American mission worker Stanley Jones once had with Gandhi during his detention in the prison of Yeravda. Jones asked him if fasting was not a form of coercion. The Mahatma answered thoughtfully: "Yes, the same kind of coercion which Jesus exercises upon you from the cross."[15]

Thus, in the suffering of Jesus Christ Gandhi saw an example to follow. Not avoiding suffering and even placing his own life on the line for an ideal is a position that does not go unnoticed. But then one must, like Jesus, be willing to pay any price—this entails total devotion. When Gandhi gradually developed his method of non-violent resistance in South Africa, he was inspired not only by the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount but also by the example that Jesus gave in his suffering. The core concept for Gandhi would ultimately become *satyagraha*, which means: clinging to the Truth. He first used the concept "passive resistance" but slowly abandoned that term. It was not a weak-willed, passive attitude he was after—and the example of Jesus made that clear. Looking back on his work in South Africa, he wrote in 1928 about Jesus as the "prince of passive resisters" but adds that this passive resistance must be viewed

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[13] See Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, (London: HarperCollins Publications, 1997); the quote concerning these lines is found on p. 284.

[14] See Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 621; E. Stanley Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1948), p. 52.

[15] Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 143.

as *satyagraha*.[16] This is where the title for Jesus, so popular in Gandhian circles, i.e. the "prince of the *satyagrahis*" comes from. Almost twenty years later he wrote:

> I showed years ago in South Africa that the adjective "passive" was a misnomer, at least as applied to Jesus. He was the most active resister known perhaps to history. His was non-violence *par excellence*.[17]

But, for Gandhi, the suffering Christ had significance not only as the prototype of non-violent struggle against evil and the supreme example of total devotion. Jesus is not only the one who has the power to lay down his life out of his own free will (John 10:18). If he were, he could still be seen too much as an exalted, divine figure. And although that would have been entirely in agreement with his Hindu background, Gandhi rejected that image of Christ. Rather, Gandhi saw Jesus' importance in his complete identification with the least in human society. The Mahatma was very much touched by a portrayal of the crucified Christ wearing only a loincloth. Here he saw the meagre clothing of millions of poor people in Indian villages: Christ as a coolie.[18] For Gandhi, this image expressed the true meaning of substitutionary suffering and in this sense he referred repeatedly to the value of Christ's' suffering and dying.

Thus for Gandhi the crucifixion of Christ became very important, even though he was never able to share the views of his orthodox Protestant acquaintances in South Africa. For that matter, during his South African period, he also became acquainted with the views of other Christians regarding the meaning of Jesus. Gandhi became aware—not so much through personal contacts as through reading—of approaches in Christology that could inspire him more than the traditional doc-

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[16] M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa*, transl. from Gujarati by Valji Govindji Desai (Madras: Ganesan, 1928), p. 180.

[17] Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. LXXXIV, p. 372 (*Harijan* 30-6-1946).

[18] See S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974.) p. 92; R.W. Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings*, Confessing the Faith in India 11 (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), p. 63.

trines of incarnation and reconciliation. Theosophical writers such as Anna Kingsford and Edward Maitland showed him that faith in Jesus could go hand-in-hand with an appreciation of Eastern religions. But above all, Gandhi was strongly influenced by reading the books by Leo Tolstoy. From this Russian utopianist Gandhi learned how Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God could be applied concretely to the political realm.

The Kingdom of God within You

In 1894, when he had been in South Africa for only a short while, Gandhi was given a book by Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910) that had just been published in English: *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Tolstoy had finished the book a year earlier, but the Russian government had forbidden its publication. It was quickly published abroad: the Russian original in Berlin and two different English translations in London and New York. In his autobiography Gandhi writes that the book made an overwhelming impression on him because of Tolstoy's independent thinking, his profound ethics and the authenticity of his writing. And yet, in this phase of his development, Gandhi was not inclined to follow Tolstoy in his radical rejection of the government. For the time being, the young lawyer still trusted that the British authorities could be brought to reason through rational arguments. Nor did he follow Tolstoy's absolute pacifism. After the outbreak of the Boer War he offered the help of the Indian community in the form of an ambulance corps without expressing any criticism on the belligerent English government. In 1906, twelve years after reading it the first time, Gandhi reread Tolstoy's book. He then became radicalized and felt more compelled to put the ideas of this writer into practice.

From the beginning Gandhi was equally influenced by Tolstoy's book with respect to his view concerning Jesus' preaching and the possibilities of linking the Sermon on the Mount to sociopolitical protest. What he had instinctively felt up to that point to be the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount he now saw elaborated as a universal ethic. Non-violence seemed to be the primary principle in all areas. And the preaching of the Kingdom of God could apparently be linked to a historical development. Gandhi stated more than once that there were three great masters in his life. They were the Jain poet Raychandbhai,

the social reformer John Ruskin with his book *Unto This Last*, and Tolstoy. The former acquainted Gandhi with the world of Eastern religion and philosophy, the latter gave him economic insights and the third was his guide with regard to the Christian faith. Gandhi correctly stated that in that area he built on the foundations laid by Tolstoy.[19]

Tolstoy reinforced Gandhi's conviction that Jesus' message can best be seen in the Sermon on the Mount. And, under Tolstoy's influence, Gandhi also highlighted the text in the Sermon on the Mount: "I tell you, Do not resist an evil person" (Matthew 5:39). According to Tolstoy, this and the accompanying texts enjoin radical non-violence. Gandhi agreed, although with him non-violence acquired more the nature of active and brave resistance, whereas in Tolstoy resignation was central.[20] But Gandhi mainly learned from Tolstoy to regard the Kingdom of God not as a spiritual supratemporal reality but as a concrete and achievable form of human society. A good illustration of this is the speech that the Mahatma held in 1916 for a meeting of economists in which he calls them to be moral and not to pursue wealth. He ends his speech with the words:

> Let us seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and the irrevocable promise is that everything will be added upon us. These are real economics. May you and I treasure them and enforce them in our daily life.[21]

In studying Gandhi's use of the Bible, it is thus also important to have a look at Tolstoy's book. And yet, this does not seem to have happened very often. The Russian writer's rather

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[19] On Tolstoy's influence on Gandhi see, e.g. Sevenster, *Gandhi en het Christendom*, pp. 196-204. Cf. also Paul Birukoff, "Mahatma Gandhi und der Tolstoiismus," in: F. Diettrich, *Die Gandhi-Revolution* (Dresden: Wolfgang Jess, 1930), pp. 149-59.

[20] H. Räisänen ("Mahatma Gandhi and the Sermon on the Mount," *Temenos* 27 (1991): 100-01) rightly points out this difference. But he exaggerates when he says that Gandhi was not at all concerned with turning the other cheek to his adversaries. This is clearly seen in the demonstration at the salt factory.

[21] Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. XIII, p. 316 (Speech at the Muir Central College Economic Society, Allahabad, 22-12-1916).

verbose argument is not very inviting.[22] Moreover, the book is difficult to find—hardly any copies can be found in libraries. On the basis of his great influence on the Indian independence movement alone Tolstoy deserves better!

But whoever takes the trouble to read Tolstoy's book will discover much of what inspired Gandhi. How the Mahatma has understood the Christian faith and applied it seems for the most part to hark back not to the Bible but to Tolstoy. It is good to understand why the Russian count could have such an influence. Whoever reads it will also be affected by the compelling rhetoric that places Western civilization under the critique of the Gospel. Every form of exercising power (army, police, tax or law) is in principle rejected. Over against this Tolstoy places the law of love and absolute freedom that is granted to everyone who believes. In his confrontation with a power in South Africa continually engaged in discrimination, this must have sounded like music to the young Gandhi's ears. In addition, Tolstoy describes the peaceful morality of Jesus in an all-encompassing historical framework. It is not a religious message that can be accepted or rejected as one wills but an irrepressible historical process from which ultimately no one can withdraw.

Leo Tolstoy was completely a person of the nineteenth century, and no where else is this so apparent as in this aspect of his thinking. His argument presupposes an optimistic belief in progress: humanity will slowly develop a continually higher form of society and the intrinsic goodness of humanity will increasingly predominate. Tolstoy writes confidently of the *factuality* of this development: "the fact that all men are constantly growing better and better of themselves."[23] Jesus' message has a certain place in this historical evolution. Tolstoy distinguishes between three phases in the history of humanity, each of which

[22] Martin Green, who was editor of the latest edition of *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, warns the readers in his foreword that they will probably not be able to read the book all the way through but will flick through the book, yawning.

[23] L. Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You: Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion But as a New Theory of Life*, transl. from Russian by Constance Garnett (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press,1984), p. 247. Originally published in 1894 in New York.

is characterized by its own outlook on life, a "theory" on life. First of all, there was personal or animal life, in which each individual looked out only for his/her own interests and there was no social context at all. After this prehistoric age of "every man for himself," there was a change in the way humans thought, a change that Tolstoy places at about 3000 B.C. Then there arose the awareness that humans are better off if they enter into obligations within a family, a tribe or a people. It was a new theory, the socialized or heathen outlook on life. This gave rise to a power structure that bound the individual person to the general interest and the greater whole. The exercise of power, also in the form of violence, was a necessary part of this theory. It is true that it took centuries for this new view of life to penetrate the minds of the people, but it was then so internalized that another way of life was barely imaginable. But that other way was heralded in the second great change in the thinking of humanity, which Tolstoy places 1800 years before his time, with the appearance of Jesus Christ.

A new phase in history begins with the teaching of Jesus. The groups that distinguished people from one another were broken up, and the law of loyalty to one's own family, tribe or nation was surpassed by the doctrine of universal brotherhood. Tolstoy sees the most important aspect of Jesus' preaching in his call not to resist evil done to one. Every form of violence and revenge is rejected. For those who live under the influence of the heathen outlook on life, this is absurd. Can any society exist without the exercise of power to keep people in line? But Tolstoy points out that even the savage person of prehistoric times could not visualize the heathen social theory that was new at that time. That is why Christ's preaching is not immediately recognized; slowly but surely it pushes ahead through eighteen centuries. This is therefore an unstoppable historical process:

> Christian doctrine is presented to men of the social or heathen theory of life to-day, in the guise of a supernatural religion, though there is in reality nothing mysterious, mystic, or supernatural about it. It is simply the theory of life which is appropriate to the present degree of material develop-

> ment, the present stage of growth of humanity, and which must therefore inevitably be accepted.[24]

It is clear, therefore, why the subtitle to Tolstoy's book reads: "Christianity Not as a Mystic Religion but as a New Theory of Life."[25]

Human beings do not understand this new theory of life very well. Both church and state are to blame for this, because they stubbornly continue to hold on to the old values of a past historical period. Tolstoy directs a fiery protest against the institutionalizing and sacralizing of the church, whereby his own Russian Orthodox Church in particular comes under attack, where rituals, the worship of icons and dogmatics were moved to the foreground and Jesus' preaching was pushed aside. Moreover, the church gave her blessing to the state exercising its power—even in its worst form: compulsory service in the army. Tolstoy calls everyone to choose for the original meaning of Christian faith: "the Sermon on the Mount, or the Creed. One cannot believe in both."[26] But the state receives its share of critique as well. Over and over again, he portrays the injustice that the poor peasants must experience at the hands of the state: conscription, bloody punishment drills after revolts, being forced into the army, taxes, justice in the interests of the rich, etc. No openness to Jesus' doctrine can be expected on the part of the rulers, and that is not to be expected either: by definition, those in power cannot be Christian.

In this situation the people who see the situation correctly can do nothing more than distance themselves from the state and passively allow the state violence to continue. Thus, the book is also a strong argument for complete pacifism. When enough people assume this attitude, the government will automatically collapse. Here Tolstoy assumes a model of immiserization that makes one think of what Karl Marx had described a quarter of a century earlier. And when will this event occur? Tolstoy puts this question on the same level of that of Jesus' disciples regarding the end of the world (Matthew 24). "Christ

[24] Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, p. 113.

[25] The original Russian edition had this subtitle as well.

[26] Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, p. 75.

answered that the end of the world (that is, of the pagan organization of life) shall come when the tribulation of men is greater than it has ever been."[27] The contribution of human beings to this establishment of the Kingdom of God consists in the recognition of and witness to the truth. And this is possible because modern humans carry the truth within them: "The Kingdom of God is within You" (Luke 17:21).

Gandhi certainly viewed the human contribution to history to be greater than Tolstoy did. And he never followed his Russian teacher in his anarchistic plea for the cessation of governmental institutions such as the courts, the police, the armed forces and taxes. But the message that the Kingdom of God will come inevitably as the new form of human society touched Gandhi deeply. Because of Tolstoy, the "Kingdom of God" became an inspiring concept and a concrete historical reality in Gandhi's movement. The words inscribed on the national monument for the Mahatma in New Delhi are characteristic. On the large stone plaque is a text by Gandhi, of which the ending reads:

> I want Khudai Raj [a divine state], which is the same thing as the Kingdom of God on earth, the establishment of such a rajya [state] would not only mean welfare of the whole of the Indian people but of the whole world.

The Unity of the Religions

Just before his death, Tolstoy wrote a long letter to Gandhi in which he opined that the new law of life was also proclaimed in the Indian philosophies but that it had been most clearly proclaimed by Jesus.[28] Gandhi saw it this way as well. The two prongs of, on the one hand, agreement between the religions and a unique preaching by Christ on the other can also be found in what the Mahatma wrote and said. In a speech on board a seagoing vessel at Christmas 1931, Gandhi said: "The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount echoed something I had

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[27] Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, p. 277.

[28] L. Tolstoy, "Gandhi Letters," in: L. Tolstoy, *Recollections & Essays by Leo Tolstoy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), pp. 433-39 (letter dated 7-9-1910).

learnt in childhood," and shortly thereafter: "Of all the things I read what remained with me for ever was that Jesus came almost to give a new law."[29]

It is clear that Gandhi easily included elements of the Christian faith into his own philosophy. Christianity may be a different religion from Hinduism, but they apparently have much in common, or at least much that can be seen as mutually enriching. This view is not very remarkable at present, but in Gandhi's day and situation it was. Christians often clearly accentuated the differences between the religions—something which Gandhi had experienced extensively and insistently as a young man in Africa. But Hindus generally also rejected the Christian religion. In addition, for the independence movement, everything that was part of the culture of the colonial powers was suspect—and most certainly their church and faith.

In this respect Gandhi demonstrated a remarkable openness. Many times he appeared to show a genuine interest in that which inspired others. The underlying idea here is that all religions are in a certain sense true, although they also all contain errors. Religions must therefore esteem one another. Hinduism was dear to him, more so than other religions, but he claimed to have an equal respect for all other religions. Ultimately, he was concerned with the religion that lay at the basis of all religions. This was a regular element in the Mahatma's speeches and articles.

For Gandhi, the ultimate unity of religions was not primarily a theoretical construction but an experienced reality. This is obvious from how he dealt with religious praxis in his ashrams.[30] For many years he held a daily prayer meeting for all inhabitants of the ashram, regardless of their religious background. These gatherings, although strongly influenced by Hindu forms, often witnessed his conviction that religions do not represent exclusive truths. The parable of the tree and its many branches was a favourite of his: "Just as a tree has many

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[29] Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. XLVIII, p. 438 (speech on board the S.S. Pilsna, 25-12-1931).

[30] See T. Mohanadoss, "The Gandhian Understanding of Prayer: Sensitivity to God and to Others," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 6 (1996): 129-44.

branches but one root, similarly the various religions are the leaves and branches of the same tree."[31]

On many occasions Gandhi gave account of his way of thinking and his accompanying religious practice, entering the lion's den fearlessly at times. Without a doubt, that was how he experienced the conference of Christian missionaries to which he had been invited in 1927. People from the audience engaged him in discussion on the forgiveness of sins, which made him think of his experiences with evangelical Christians in South Africa. He was ultimately able to develop his own view on the plurality of religions. A somewhat longer quote from his speech gives a good idea as to the broad view of religions he had adopted:

> In spite of my being a staunch Hindu I find room in my faith for Christian and Islamic and Zoroastrian teaching, and, therefore, my Hinduism seems to some to be a conglomeration and some have even dubbed me an eclectic. Well, to call a man eclectic is to say that he has no faith, but mine is a broad faith which does not oppose Christians—not even a Plymouth Brother—not even the most fanatical Mussalman. It is a faith based on the broadest possible toleration. I refuse to abuse a man for his fanatical deeds, because I try to see them from his point of view. It is that broad faith that sustains me. It is a somewhat embarrassing position I know,—but to others, not to me![32]

This is a beautiful example of the tolerant attitude by which the Mahatma made a deep impression on many, Christians as well. It exudes a well-considered choice for this "broad faith." It has nothing to do with lazy eclecticism; it even wants to do justice to fundamentalist believers, who themselves would not do such justice to others. Gandhi knew it was a controversial point of view, but he experienced it as giving him support and had made it completely his own.

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[31] Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. LXXXV, p. 31 (Excerpts from Speeches at Prayer Meetings, July 1946).

[32] Gandhi, *The Collected Works*, vol. XXXV, pp. 254-55 (speech at the Missionary Conference, Colombo, Ceylon, 16-11-1927).

The question arises as to where the basis can be found in his religious background that enabled him to assimilate this tolerant position. Gandhi researchers have given very different answers to this question, as can be seen immediately in certain publications. Gandhi's position is often linked with the *advaita* tradition, the monistic system that was developed by Shankara and experienced a revival in the nineteenth century in India, since the one divine truth that hides behind all religions appears to be monistic.[33] Others see more affinity with the Ramanuja school with its *vishishtadvaita*, because Gandhi is not concerned with a non-dual realization of the truth but with individual people who are sparks of the truth.[34] There is also repeated reference to the influence of the Jain monks in his environment on Gandhi in his youth. Gandhi supposedly borrowed from Jainism the idea of the multifaceted nature of the truth, the *anekantavada*, of which everyone has but a part.[35]

There is something to be said for all these different ways of thinking. Gandhi never gave a systematic explanation of the concept of religion. In line with the situation in question, he responded to whatever moved people around him. With that he continually made room in a flexible way for elements of religious experiences and thoughts. He could make creative use of the variety of the religious and philosophical schools of India. It simply is not possible to place him definitively in one school or another.

It is clarifying to discover how he learned in his youth to deal with the variety of religions. Mohandas Gandhi's mother belonged to the *Pranami sampradaya*. The adherents of this little-known *bhakti* movement are concentrated mainly in Gujarat. The more remarkable thing about this school in Vaishnavism is its extensive openness towards other religious traditions, both

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[33] According to G. Richards, *The Philosophy of Gandhi*: *A Study of His Basic Ideas* (London: Curzon Press, 1982), pp. 1-4.

[34] According to H.M. Vroom, *Religions and the Truth: Philosophical Reflections and Perspectives*, transl. J.W. Rebel, Currents of Encounter 2 (Grand Rapids/Amsterdam: Eerdmans/Rodopi, 1989), p. 137.

[35] According to D.L. Eck, "Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference," in: R. Ellsberg, *Gandhi on Christianity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), p. 79.

within and outside of Hinduism. Although the importance of this for the development of Gandhi's religious experience is evident, this aspect of his life history has, strangely enough, received little attention.[36]

In Richard Attenborough's movie *Gandhi,* this element of his biography is portrayed in a unique penetrating way. Just before the huge protest against the salt monopoly, we see Gandhi in conversation with a foreigner; they are on the coast, in Gandhi's birthplace of Porbandar. Glancing at the harbour city, Gandhi says:

> As you can see, my city is a sea city, always full of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Jews, Persians. My family sect was the Pranami, Hindu of course; but in our temple the priest used to read from the Muslim Koran and the Hindu Gita, moving from one to the other as if it mattered not which book was being read, as long as God was being worshipped.

The words "family sect" need to be relativized somewhat here. It was Gandhi's pious mother who belonged to this movement. His father, in contrast, appears to have had no ties at all with this group. Years after Gandhi left his familial home, he hinted in a conversation with a visitor at the differences between his parents with regard to religion. He related how his father, a widower for the third time, had trouble finding a new bride.

> It was not easy even for State minister to get a fourth wife. The search discovered her in some village near Junagadh. She belonged to this "Pranami" sect. I remember, during our round for God's darshans, we, the newly weds, were taken not only to the temples of the Vaishnava sect but also to that of the Pranamis. How could my father have any idea

[36] One of the few exceptions is Mark Thomson's *Gandhi and his Ashrams* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1995), in which Thomson cautiously concludes (p. 5): "Though brought up in the lap of Hindu orthodoxy, the reformism of the pranami doubtless exercised some influence upon him."

> then (when he married) of what the Pranami *dharma* meant?[37]

This does not detract from the fact that the great religious influence of young Gandhi's mother certainly played a part in his becoming acquainted with the syncretic praxis of the *pranami* movement. This included the remarkable habit of placing various sacred texts next to one another to read and worship.

This unusual ritual harks back to the seventeenth century. Hindus rebelled in various parts of India during the rule of the fanatic Muslim emperor Aurangzeb. As could be expected, there were many Hindus who wanted to see the Muslim government replaced by a Hindu government that was just as exclusive. This held for the, for example, large resistance movement in Maharashtra under Shivaji. But it is remarkable that there were also Hindus who resisted the Muslim dominance, striving in that resistance for the ideal of the peaceful coexistence of religions. The finest example of this can be found in Bundelkhand, an area in the northwest of India. The commander-in-chief Chhatrasal mobilized a large troop that was finally able to drive the soldiers of the Great Moghul out of the area. The spiritual leader of the movement was Swami Prannath of the *Pranami sampradaya*.[38]

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the *pranamis* were separated from the *Radhavallabhai sampradaya*. This is a movement within Vaishnavism to whom emotional devotion for the young Krishna is central. Swami Prannath was the

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[37] M.H. Desai, *Day-to-Day with Gandhi: Secretary's Diary*, vol. 5 (Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, 1970), pp. 118-19 (conversation Gandhi had with a visitor who told him he was *pranami*, January 1925).

[38] On this movement (also called *Nijananda sampradaya* or *Krishna Pranami sampradaya*): B. Gupta, "Swami Pran Nath and the Pranami Religious Movement in the 17th Century Bundelkhand," in: S.P. Sen, *Social Contents of Indian Religious Reform Movements* (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1978), pp. 183-95; P.S. Mukharya, "Sant Prannath and the Pranami Sect," in: N.N. Bhattacharyya, *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India*, Sri Caitanya Quincentenary Commemoration Volume (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1989), pp. 113-26; B.D. Gupta, "Pranami Sampradaya in Bundelkhand," in: Bhattacharyya, *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India*, pp. 127-35.

leader of the *pranamis* in the second half of the century. It was he who gave the movement its own character, which distinguished it sharply from other groups. The greatest difference lay in their view of the relationship between the religions. The movement has never abandoned the worship of Krishna, but a great deal has been added to it. Swami Prannath was gradually convinced that all religions ultimately came down to the same thing and that the differences between religious groups should therefore be transcended.

This was not a theoretical insight, arrived at within the safety of his own group. At the basis of Prannath's conviction lay a broad knowledge of all possible religions. The guru had studied the holy scriptures of all the schools he encountered around him. He did not limit himself to the Hindus but also read the sacred texts of the Jains, Buddhists and Muslims. To enlarge his knowledge of Islam, he made various trips to Arabic countries where he built up contacts with Islamic theologians. Nor did the Christian faith lie outside of his interest. Through the Portuguese and British people he encountered in the harbour city of Gujarat, he acquired some knowledge of the Bible and church doctrine.

This religious exploration convinced him that the content of the different religions was essentially the same. In his view, the differences were the result of the various cultures in which the religions flourished. This position had been advanced earlier in a moderate form in Sufi and Sant circles, namely by Kabir.[39] Prannath was certainly influenced by him, but he pushed the synthetic approach of religions to the extreme.[40] For him, the issue was the purest form of *sarvadharma samanatva*, or the equality of all teachings. The statements by Swami Prannath, collected in the sacred text of Kuljam, attest to this regularly. A characteristic text, still popular with the movement, reads:

> They all gave different names to God
> and all adopted different rituals.

[39] On Kabir see Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten*, pp. 96-114.

[40] On the influence of Sufism on Prannath see H.M.T. Ali, "Influence of Islam and Sufism on Prannath's Religious Movement," in: Bhattacharyya, *Medieval Bhakti Movements in India*, pp. 136-48.

> But everything consists of Soul and Universe
> "Allah" and "Brahman" are one.[41]

Therefore, it is not surprising that elements from different religions are given a place in the movement's cultus. Already early on, next to the Hindu sacred texts, a copy of the Qur'an was revered and recited.

But it was not only the cultus of the *Pranami* movement that influenced Mahatma Gandhi. Swami Prannath also fought for independence, although he did not shun violence in this fight. Gandhi probably felt some affinity for this great leader of his mother's religious community because of his political involvement. In particular, Prannath's continuous call to stop the fighting between the different religious communities fits completely into Gandhi's world. Prannath urged all religious groups to transcend their differences and to live with one another in harmony. He listed the communities in his area: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Jains, etc.[42] He was tough in his critique of them, because they were all concerned only with their own interests and could see the others merely as adversaries. Prannath introduced his new community as an alternative in which religion is experienced in its essence, directed at the one God who can be discovered behind all religions. One of the most well-known texts of the Pranami movements states it as follows:

> He is praised by different names
> and the various costumes [of his devotees] are not the same.
> But no one should quarrel with the others,
> for the Lord of all the peoples is One.[43]

It is from this background that Mahatma Gandhi approached the other religious communities of his time. It is not surprising that he, like Prannath, felt compelled to study the doctrine and experiences of the other religions intensely. For Gandhi, that study of the various religions resulted in a synthe-

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[41] *Kuljam*, Khulasa 12:38.

[42] *Kuljam*, Kirantan 53:2. Prannath used the word *firangi* (foreigner) for Christians.

[43] *Kuljam*, Sanandh 41:72.

sis that he himself referred to by the classical term *sarvadharma samanatva*, the equality of all doctrine.[44] Gandhi did take the differences among the religious schools more seriously than Prannath, but he also assumed a common basis. The result of this conviction is that he definitely rejected a transition from the one religion to another. There is no point in "converting" to another religion, for they all worship the same God. Thus Gandhi was also very critical of mission work. This was directed not only at Western missionaries in his country but also at native Christians who wanted to convert others to the Christian faith. It is significant that Gandhians called V.S. Azariah, a native bishop in the Anglican church, "Gandhi's Enemy Number One." Azariah was, like Gandhi, closely involved with the fate of the so-called untouchables who form the lowest category in the caste hierarchy.[45] But the bishop wanted to include all of them in his church community, whereas for Gandhi the only correct way to view this part of the population was their recognition within Hinduism as *harijan* (children of God).

Even though the Mahatma radically rejected conversion, he rejoiced when people were affected by aspects of another religion and wanted to adopt them into their own religious experience. He himself integrated many elements—from Christianity in particular—into his own religion.

Gandhi and Christianity

With the passage of time, the image of Gandhi's attitude towards Christianity has altered. During his life, many saw the Mahatma as an exemplary Christian. That he himself emphatically declared that he was Hindu and not Christian barely detracted from this. In a certain sense, this even reinforced the holiness that, in the eyes of many, marked him as Christian.

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[44] Cf. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, pp. 80-81; Eck, "Gandhian Guidelines for a World of Religious Difference," pp. 80-81.

[45] S.B. Harper, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma: Bishop V.S. Azariah and the Travails of Christianity in British India* (Grand Rapids/Richmond: Eerdmans/Curzon Press, 2000), pp. 291-351.

Christians called him "an unbaptized Christian"[46] or "a Hindu who was deeply christianized."[47] His non-violent protests, such as the demonstration at the salt factory, were seen as the concretization of evangelical preaching. And whoever saw how far the Mahatma went in self-sacrifice also tended to see him as an example for church and Christianity. He was "the most Christian Christian."[48]

Those who did note Gandhi's commitment to his own Hindu religion still wanted to see him in the light of the biblical covenant. To that circle it was obvious to compare him with the Roman centurion of whom Christ says: "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith" (Matthew 8:10).[49] In any case, there was the conviction that the Mahatma was a perfect example of putting into practice what Jesus had intended.

Hindus also connected the appearance of their great leader with biblical values. A good example of this can be found in how the protest at the salt factory in 1930 was presented. Gandhi mobilized a large crowd of followers for a march of three hundred kilometres to the coast. There they would, in protest, extract salt from seawater, a punishable act according to the colonial government. This very obvious march was quickly compared to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem as described in the gospels. This comparison was probably begun by his Christian followers, but Hindus were also moved by it—many Hindus bought a Bible so they could read about this episode.[50]

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[46] Term used by Friedrich Heiler, the German religious phenomenology: cf. F. Heiler, *Christlicher Glaube und indisches Geistesleben* (Munich: Ernst Reinhardt, 1926), p. 37.

[47] Term used by the American missionary E. Stanley Jones; cf. Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 79.

[48] So formulated by the Austrian philosopher Oskar Ewald (Friedländer): O. Ewald, "Gandhi, der Politiker des Geistes," in: Diettrich, *Die Gandhi-Revolution*, p. 49.

[49] According to Sevenster, *Gandhi en het Christendom*, p. 231.

[50] V. Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 147.

After Gandhi was killed, he was linked even more closely to Jesus and the Gospel, his fate being often compared by Christian sympathizers to Christ's crucifixion. The American missionary Stanley Jones wrote of "the greatest tragedy since the Son of God died on the cross."[51] One Christian Gandhian called him "the real Christ of India."[52] But many Hindus went quite far in identifying the Mahatma with Christ. Gandhi was often portrayed as a Christus redivivus; he was called "the second Saviour" or "a brother of Jesus Christ in martyrdom," and even "Christ returned to earth."[53]

But this image altered drastically from the 1960s on. In general, people became much more aware of Gandhi's Hindu roots. Now it was pointed out especially that the tradition of non-violence (*ahimsa*) had already existed in Jainism and, less explicitly, in Hinduism. Gandhi may have read the Sermon on the Mount very attentively, but he did not need it to implement what was already present in the treasury of Indian religions for centuries. In a renewed self-consciousness in independent India, researchers looked first to sources in its own history. A supplement and reinforcement from Christianity was acceptable, but the idea that the "father of the nation" was a crypto-Christian can scarcely be tolerated any more.

The hundredth birthday of the Mahatma was celebrated lavishly in 1969, and with this in mind, a commemorative book was published in the year prior,[54] to which many famous people from home and abroad contributed. It is remarkable that in this book there are scarcely any references to the Christian influence on Gandhi's ideas, especially not by Indians.[55] The editor of the book was Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the famous Hin-

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[51] Jones, *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 17.

[52] S.K. George, cited by M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM, 1969), p. 215.

[53] See the various quotes by E.S. Jones in *Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 101.

[54] S. Radhakrishnan, *Mahatma Gandhi 100 Years* (New Delhi: Gandhi Peace Foundation, 1968).

[55] Stanley Jones, by that time well advanced in years, did do so, as was to be expected. So did Cardinal Valerian Gracias, who wrote on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church.

du philosopher who had been president of India for some years. In his introduction he wrote about the central place that religion occupied in Gandhi's life, but he also refers exclusively to Hinduism: "In the spirit of Hindu religion he looked upon the Divine not only as a transcendental Absolute but as a personal God."[56] J.B. Kripalani, prime minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh and formerly involved in the struggle for independence, wrote similarly about Gandhi's spiritual ideas. He does write that Gandhi studied the Bible during his stay as a student in England and that he had Christian friends in South Africa but concludes: "All these contacts confirmed him in his own faith, Hinduism."[57] For the rest, his article exclusively discusses the Hindu context of Gandhi's spiritual development, paying particular attention to his resistance to mission work and attempts at conversion. The Sermon on the Mount and Christ's disciples are not mentioned.

Christian theologians have also distanced themselves from the all too facile incorporation of Gandhi into their own religious tradition. Precisely in the Indian churches, people want to examine Gandhi's Hindu sources carefully. This easily leads to a view in which the Christian influence on the great leader of the independence movement is minimalized. Stanley Samartha, one of India's most prominent theologians, wrote:

> [I]t remains true that the basic inspiration in Gandhiji's life and work came not from Christianity but from his own religion, viz. Hinduism, selectively used and reinterpreted by him …. It is possible, of course, to see certain similarities in the life and work of Christ, but fundamentally Christ and his example constituted a supporting plank rather than the main pillar of his life.[58]

Nevertheless, such an assessment does not do justice to the fascination for Jesus and his ethical teachings that Gandhi always showed. It can certainly be appreciated that the Hindu

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[56] S. Radhakrishnan, *Mahatma Gandhi 100 Years*, p. 3.

[57] J.B. Kripalani, "Gandhiji's Spiritual Ideas," in: Radhakrishnan, *Mahatma Gandhi 100 Years*, pp. 200-10; the quote is found on p. 201.

[58] Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, pp. 94-95. See chapter 9 of this volume for a discussion of Samartha.

background of Gandhi's thinking is also acknowledged now. But whoever reads Gandhi's writings and thinks about his work cannot avoid the conclusion that the acquaintance with the Christian faith meant something fundamental to him. His background in a Hindu school that was more open than usual to other religions made it possible for him to borrow some essential elements from the Christian tradition.

For Gandhi, Jesus Christ has always been the exemplary model for non-violence: he was the "Prince of all passive resisters."[59] However much the Mahatma borrowed from Indian sources to develop his concept of *ahimsa*, which by the way is more Jain than Hindu, it is the text of the Sermon on the Mount that put him on the track of this principle. The non-violent protest at the salt factory with such a radical self-sacrifice would not have been imaginable if Gandhi had not been acquainted with the Gospel.

It is the person of Jesus who embodied the Truth in the whole of his way of life and his path of suffering that continued to inspire Gandhi as the prince of the *satyagrahis*. For Gandhi, Christ's crucifixion had a crucial meaning in his concept of substitutionary suffering. And the image of Jesus on the cross has always remained with him as an expression of God's compassion toward the least in human society.

Due to Tolstoy's inspiration, Gandhi was able to apply the Gospel's concept of the Kingdom of God in thought and deed as a concrete possibility for human society, and India's independence movement received a special impulse because of it. The ideal of the new state of their own received such a positive interpretation: not so much liberation from the colonial yoke as an exemplary society that would benefit the entire world.

The Mahatma did not become a Christian, but he was more than marginally influenced by the Gospel. If he had not encountered the Christian faith, he would not have inspired people in this way.

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[59] Gandhi called Jesus, already in a 1920 article, the "Prince among passive resisters" (*Young India* (4-8-1920)); later he used mostly "the Prince of all passive resisters" or "the Prince of the satyagrahis."

Nandalal Bose

Gandhi is not known particularly for his love of the visual arts, but there was a painter with whom he had intensive contact and whose work he appreciated very much. That was Nandalal Bose (1883-1966), who was also a fervent adherent of the Gandhian movement, a fact to which many of his paintings testify. In 1945 Gandhi stayed for some time at the academy where Bose taught, and had long conversations with the artist in his studio. During Gandhi's stay, Bose did some paintings, including two of Jesus Christ carrying the cross. This was the image of Christ that affected Gandhi in particular.

Nandalal Bose was a famous artist of the Bengal School of Art. This art school was part of a broader cultural movement that was usually called the Bengal Renaissance. A rediscovery of the old Indian cultural values began at the end of the nineteenth century in Bengal. In protest against the colonial domination, a number of intellectuals made a radical break with British culture and focused completely on their own cultural history. Their leader was the poet, writer, philosopher and educator Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). The centre of the movement was the educational institution he founded, Shanti Niketan, 130 kilometres northwest of Calcutta.

At Shanti Niketan, the methods of teaching were those that they thought had been employed in ancient India. That meant, first of all, education in the open air, with students sitting around a guru. Above all, this entailed a comprehensive education, with intellectual, religious and artistic subjects in balance. Thus, artists were also linked to Shanti Niketan. It is chiefly Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), Rabindranath's nephew, who did important pioneering work in the visual arts. He attempted to free his students from European influences and to develop together with them an actual Indian art, based on their own cultural history. Nandalal Bose was Abanindranath Tagore's most important student.

In the dozens of years that Nandalal Bose worked at Shanti Niketan, he portrayed a number of themes in his painting.

These included classical scenes from Hindu mythology as well as landscapes, village scenes and episodes from the Gandhian movement. Bose did not cut himself off from European cultural history to such an extent that he refused entirely to use Western motifs in his paintings. Thus, he made a number of paintings of Jesus Christ. It is striking that the majority—possibly even all—of his paintings of Christ depict the crucifixion.[1] Apparently, for Bose, the importance of Christ is primarily that people see him as the suffering one. It is precisely this that affected Gandhi so strongly. It was not for nothing that his favourite hymn was: "When I survey the wondrous cross,/ On which the Prince of glory died."

When Mahatma Gandhi stayed at Shanti Niketan for some time in 1945, Nandalal Bose did two paintings that portray Christ carrying the cross. This would certainly have been the subject of conversation between the artist and his guest. In any case, we know that Gandhi was very much taken with these paintings. And that was because of a very special reason. In itself, the portrayal of this Christian theme is not surprising: Jesus is depicted in a classical way with a crown of thorns and even a halo. The episode depicted here is when Jesus stumbles under the burden of the cross (*Christ Carrying the Cross*). It is one of the scenes in the traditional Roman Catholic stations of the cross. The woman who helps Jesus is an original addition but not truly remarkable. There were women present during Jesus' journey to the cross: Veronica,



[1] Richard W. Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings*, Confessing the Faith in India 11 (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), p. 58.

Mary Magdalene or more anonymous "daughters of Zion." But what made this painting by Bose so remarkable was Jesus' clothes: he is wearing a *lungi*, the customary loincloth worn by the poorest Indians, the coolies or agricultural labourers. Thus Christ becomes the one who, in God's name, takes the part of those who do not count in society. In the suffering that he takes upon himself, he himself becomes one of the poor. God's mercy for precisely the least in society becomes visible in this suffering. And that was what was important about Jesus Christ for Mahatma Gandhi.

CHAPTER 8

The Eternal Christ in the Ashram Movement

Indian Christology has received a very special impulse via the so-called ashram movement. From the beginning of the 1920s on, a few small communities of Protestant Christians developed that wanted to experience the Christian faith in a truly Indian way. They called their centres ashrams, following the example of Mahatma Gandhi who was attracting a great deal of attention at that time with his idealistic ashram community. After India became independent, various Roman Catholic ashrams were also established by monastic orders or by congregations. The ashram movement was at its peak in the 1970s and 1980s, with about one hundred ashrams spread throughout the entire Indian subcontinent.

Ashrams, Ancient and Modern

The word *ashrama* means "place of religious exertion" and is a term that takes us far back into the history of Hinduism. There were many sages in the old Vedic times who would retreat deep into the forest or high into the mountains. Usually, such a seer (*rishi*) would attract a circle of students who could learn the wisdom of their teacher through living together. The ashram was therefore a place of ascetism and teaching. Whoever went there to live, either for a short stay or a long one, broke with the way of life in ordinary society. This was accentuated by the location of the ashrams, which were far away from villages and cities. But it was not only the distance from the inhabited world that determined the location of the ashram. Such a community was, as a rule, established on a sacred spot. There were usually myths about the gods linked to a mountain, but the banks of a holy river was also a place with extra religious significance. In any case, the site where an ashram was established was holy because of the presence of the seer and his *sadhana*, i.e. the meditation and ascetism he practised.

An ashram is not a monastery, although they do have similar characteristics. A monastery (*matha*) is also obviously a place

to meditate and to renounce the world. Nonetheless, unlike a monastery, an ashram is not part of a religious organization; rather, it is completely disconnected from larger associations. It is the person of the teacher who determines the existence of the ashram. When the teacher leaves or dies, the ashram essentially ceases to exist. In contrast, a monastery—no matter how important a religious teacher may be—displays a continuity that is independent of individuals: when the guru dies, he is succeeded by one of his students.

The ancient concept of the ashram was given new life at the beginning of the twentieth century. The two great reformers of Hinduism in that period both used this ancient institution as an example for a new way of living together on a religious-ethical basis. Mahatma Gandhi established his first ashram in 1917,[1] gathering a number of students in a community called Satyagraha Ashram. For many years it was located close to the village of Sabarmati, not far from the city of Ahmedabad. The principles of Gandhian life were practised in this ashram: great emphasis was placed on a simple and sober life in harmony with nature. Classic village industriousness, such as spinning cotton by hand, was strongly encouraged. Still, various activities aimed toward an independent India were begun within the ashram as well. There was a continual stream of visitors who were inspired by Gandhi to oppose European culture and the colonial government. This was certainly not the traditional ideal of shunning the world—the ashram became a place from which one could change the world. Thus, the establishment of the community close to a large city was not without reason, and this was an important deviation from the classic ashram ideal.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) also harked back to the old institution of the ashram when looking for a model for education that was in keeping with the Indian culture. His ideal was a "forest university," where teachers and students would live together in seclusion, away from modern society. Instruction would not only be a matter of the intellectual transfer of knowledge but in particular a shared experience of life. Tagore set up his project in Shanti Niketan (West Bengal), where it became a community whose goal was the meeting of Eastern and

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[1] For Mahatma Gandhi, see chapter 7 of this book.

Western knowledge. In an informal atmosphere, most often out in the open, the student learned from the teachers and from one another.

In this old ashram concept Christian missionaries saw new possibilities for the inculturation of the Christian faith in India. They deliberately joined both the classic institution of the ashram as well as the modern form that Gandhi and Tagore had developed. S. Jesudason established the first Christian ashram, a community based on the old and new models, and wrote a book about it called *Ashrams, Ancient and Modern*.[2] Jesudason appropriated a number of characteristics of the ancient ashram, of which the presence of the seer as a central figure was the primary characteristic. Other characteristics were that the goal of the ashram should always be to attain an ideal (*sadhana*); the community should be established in natural surroundings and be characterized by a lifestyle of simplicity; the inhabitants of the ashram should follow the example of the guru in living celibate lives. In contrast to classic ashrams, however, it was important for a Christian ashram not to be too far removed from society. Jesudason deliberately followed Gandhi's way of thinking. The ashram must be linked with the lives of people outside its own circle and be able to make a contribution to society. Thus the old institute of the ashram acquired a new function of which the Christian church could take advantage.

A Protestant Beginning

In 1921 the Christukula Ashram was established in Tirupattur (North Arcot Dt., Tamilnadu).[3] Its name means "Family of Christ," thereby stressing two aspects of the ashram. First, it was a community of men who wanted to live together as a family. Other relationships could not be accepted—they were celibate. The community was concerned with complete devotion to Christ; all of life was in service to Christ. The name Christukula

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[2] Savarirayan Jesudason, *Ashrams, Ancient and Modern: Their Aims and Ideals* (Vellore: Sri Ramachandra Press, 1937).

[3] For its history, see in particular Jesudason's autobiography, *Reminiscences of a Pilgrim of Life: An Autobiography*, rev. 2nd ed. (Vellore: Sri Ramachandra Press, 1959), and Ernest Forrester-Paton's article, "Die Ashrams," *Quatember* 17 (1953): 170-74.

reflected the old educative ideal of the *gurukula*: the communal life of a guru with his followers. Thus, in this ashram Christ was seen as a guru: everything was subject to his authority. As a rule, Christian ashrams initially gave content to the concept of the guru in this way. But it usually became quickly apparent that the central authoritarian figure in the ashram was actually a human guru. And that is what happened in this first Christian ashram as well.

The founders were two doctors who had met in England. Savarirayan Jesudason (1882-1962) came from a family that had been Christian for a number of centuries. In 1690 a Jesuit priest who followed the example of Roberto de Nobili and wore the clothes of a Hindu *sannyasi* spoke comfortingly to one of his ancestors at the cremation of his child. It was because of his contact with this holy man who preached a new religion that he became converted to Christianity. Jesudason liked to tell about his family history. As a child he himself had dreamed of becoming an itinerant preacher in Indian fashion, dressed in the ochre clothing of the *sannyasi*, but in the end he chose to study medicine. When he was in Scotland to study for his specialization in surgery, he became friends with a medical student, Ernest Forrester-Paton (1891-1970). Together they decided to enter mission work and were sent by the United Free Church Mission of Scotland to India in 1915.

They worked for a number of years in a mission hospital in Pune but were not satisfied: the hierarchy in the medical world and the Western atmosphere were not to their liking. Slowly, they began to formulate a plan to develop a form of Christian presence and exertion that would be more suited to the Hindu culture. Such ideas were being developed by other Christians at that time. The famous Marathi poet N.V. Tilak (1862-1919) had already attempted to establish an experimental community on a Christian basis and enthusiastically told both mission doctors about it. The wandering Christian mystic Sadhu Sundar Singh (1889-1929) stimulated them in their plans as well.

Sundar Singh was one of the first to see the significance of a radical inculturation of the Gospel in India. He was the figurehead at the beginning of the twentieth century of a new Indian form of Christianity. After he had been baptized in 1905 (according to tradition, on his sixteenth birthday), he put on the

clothing of a *sannyasi* and travelled around preaching the Christian faith. His wanderings of many years brought him to many different parts of the Indian subcontinent, including far into the Himalayas. The Sadhu never founded an ashram himself but his way of life and his preaching certainly had great influence on the ashram movement. One of his most well-known sayings is: "Indians desperately need the Water of Life, but they do not want it in European vessels."[4] That is exactly what the founders of Christian ashrams took advantage of.

When Jesudason and his friend returned to India in 1920 after a furlough, they decided to carry out their plan. Forrester-Paton came from a wealthy industrial family of substance and had the necessary money at his disposal. Nonetheless, it was Jesudason who, as the "elder brother," was given charge of the new ashram. British circles were certainly shocked that a European doctor was to be subordinate to an Indian. But both had consciously chosen for this division of roles.

In 1921 Jesudason and Forrester-Paton founded their Christukula Ashram. With a number of co-workers, they began with a hospital in a rented building. The first goal of the ashram was formulated as such: "A life of prayer and selfless service was more important than mere preaching as a witness to the power of the redeeming love of Christ and as a vital influence in attracting others to Him."[5] The next year they were able to use the new buildings on their own property. The main activity continued to be the work in the hospital, but in time a school and a farm were also established. The community was never large. There were usually between twenty and thirty volunteers, but only a few of them felt called to make a lifetime commitment to the ashram.

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[4] Sadhu Sundar Singh, *Wisdom of the Sadhu*, ed. Kim Comer (Farmington: Plough Publishing House, 2000), p. 174. On Sadhu Singh see also: A.J. Appasamy, *Sundar Singh: A Biography* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1966), Michael Biehl, *Der Fall Sundar Singh: Theologie zwischen den Kulturen*, Studien zur interkulturellen Geschichte des Christentums 66 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1990).

[5] Jesudason, *Reminiscences of a Pilgrim of Life*, p. 117.



From the very beginning, the religious praxis of the ashram was based on Indian patterns. Following Hinduism, prayer services were scheduled at sunrise and sunset. For Hindus, these are the sacred transition moments between light and dark, the *sandhya*. A hymnal and a prayer book were produced in the Tamil language for these celebrations. Personal meditation and Bible reading formed an important part of the hours. The ashram had made an interesting contribution to Christian architecture in India already in 1932 by constructing a sanctuary that was built entirely in the southern Indian Hindu style. This is called *jebalayam*, the usual Tamil word for a prayer house of whatever persuasion. The entrance (*gopuram*) in particular is a beautiful example of adaptation to the religious architecture of the area.[6]

Shortly after the establishment of the Christukula Ashram, a Christian ashram that would eventually become prominent was established in the west of India: the Christa Seva Sangha or "Community of the Servants of Christ."[7] This was also a community of Indian and European Christians, but the accent here lay more on meditation and study than on social work. The founder was Jack Copley Winslow (1882-1974), who had worked in missions as an Anglican priest, sent by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. For a number of years he was

[6] The sketch here is by K.G. Mathew, taken from: K.G. Mathew and Cecil Hargreaves, *25 Indian Churches* (Calcutta: Bishop College, 1975), p. 42.

[7] For its history see Barbara Noreen, *Crossroads of The Spirit* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994); the memoirs of the founder, Jack C. Winslow, *The Eyelids of the Dawn: Memories, Reflections and Hopes* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1954), and a few articles in a publication by the ashram: *Christ Prem Seva Ashram: Indian Spirituality in Action* (Mumbai: Asian Trading Corporation, 1973).

the headmaster of a high school where the students were mainly from the untouchable castes. During this time, he and three friends developed an Indian liturgy for the Lord's Supper based largely on the liturgy of the old Syrian Orthodox church in Kerala. Their work here even obtained official recognition from the Anglican Church and would prove to be significant for later liturgical development in India. It is characteristic of Winslow's efforts in the inculturation of the Gospel in India.

He did some thinking while on furlough in England. He regretted the fact that his way of life separated him completely from Indian Christians. And he increasingly saw the limitations of the Western presentation of faith by the missionary agencies. Reading about the old ashrams of the Vedic period, he underwent a mystic experience—he became convinced that this was what the church in India needed and he saw this as his task. Back in India, he gathered some Indian Christians together and started a small community. In addition to Winslow, there were seven altogether: three teenage boys whom Winslow viewed as his students, and two couples. Winslow's views of relationships were different from Jesudason's. Although he himself was not married, he did not object to married couples in his ashram. For him, it was a matter not of living in celibacy but rather of living in poverty and devotion. He expressly did not want to found a monastery and had no interest in requesting the members of the community to take vows.

Although these ashrams stress different things, they were both inspired initially by the same people. Winslow also refers explicitly to Gandhi and Tagore: the influence of the Gandhian movement in the founding of the oldest Christian ashrams must not be underestimated.[8] For a number of decades Jack Winslow was very good friends with C.F. Andrews (1871-1940), the faithful Christian companion of the Mahatma, who was also in contact with Jesudason. Winslow regularly referred to Andrews as "my guru." He also knew Forrester-Paton well, and

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[8] See also V.K. Bawa, "Mahatma Gandhi, C.F. Andrews, Sundar Singh and the Origin of Christian Ashrams in India, circa 1900 to 1935," in: R.E. Hedlund, *Christianity is Indian: The Emergence of an Indigenous Community* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2000), pp. 127-38.

they exchanged plans for their ashrams. Other common acquaintances were the poet N.V. Tilak and Sadhu Sundar Singh.

After a number of years, the Christa Seva Sangha acquired permanent accommodations in the suburbs of the city of Pune. Here the old ashram ideal of a remote place in the forest had been abandoned completely. After all, the presence of the city made certain activities possible. The Sangha established a hostel where students of all backgrounds were received in a Christian atmosphere. The ashram also attracted many visitors from the city who attended readings or wanted to go on a personal retreat. The community was much more directed at reflection and study than in Tirupattur. The religious praxis did have a similar pattern, with celebrations at sunrise and sunset in the Indian style. But Winslow tended to borrow more directly from Hinduism. The community would respond to the worship leader's call to lift up one's heart to Christ (following the classic *sursum corda*) by reciting the Gayatri mantra. Winslow translated this text as: "Let us meditate on the excellent glory of the Divine Illuminer! May He inspire our understanding!"[9] It should, however, be taken into consideration that this very sacred text, which every brahman used in his morning and evening rituals, was being used to invoke the Vedic divinity Savitar. The prayers ended with a text that exuded the Vedanta, adopted from one of the Upanishads:

> From falsehood lead me to truth;
> From darkness lead me to light;
> From death lead me to immortality.
> (Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad I.3.28),

followed by the usual: "Shantih, shantih, shantih!" ("Peace, peace, peace").

The chief purpose of the ashram was the celebration of Christ in prayer and meditation, in connection with which Winslow consciously used the word *bhakti*.[10] From the very begin-

[9] Winslow, *The Eyelids of the Dawn*, p. 81. The mantra can be found in Rig-Veda III. 62.10. A more literal translation would read: "May we receive the desirable light of the god Savitar, who will inspire our thoughts."

[10] Winslow, *The Eyelids of the Dawn*, p. 79.

ning of his stay in India he was very impressed by the spirituality of the *bhakti* movement. He felt the verses by Tukaram were "wonderful Hindu worship" and that they deserved an object of worship more worthy than Shiva or Krishna: "Think what it may become when it is lavished upon Christ, the perfect and satisfying Incarnation of the Invisible God."[11] It is clear that Winslow's starting point was the fulfillment theology that was so popular among Protestant theologians in his time. J.N. Farquhar (1861-1929) had linked faith in Christ with religion in India as "the crown of Hinduism." Winslow, strongly influenced by Farquhar's work, also regarded Hinduism as a religion that could truly come into its own only through devotion to Christ.

In the community in Pune Winslow was the undisputed leader. Although it had been stipulated when the community was established that there would be no guru or head of the ashram other than Jesus Christ, in practice Winslow quickly became the guru. The fact that he was the only Westerner in the ashram and was the only one who had been ordained as a priest would certainly have strengthened his position. He also emphasized his position himself by taking on a religious name: Swami Devadatta, i.e. "the One Given by God." But the relationship altered when he increased the membership of the ashram community with eight Westerners he himself had recruited in England. In doing so, he brought in a Trojan horse into the community. The newcomers had been very strongly influenced by the Franciscan movement in the Anglican church and had little affinity with Hinduism and Indian society. They wanted to form a Franciscan monastic community very much in line with the European model. Celibacy played a large role in this; they did not want to admit the married members of the ashram into its inner circle but to organize them into a "Third Order." This fundamental difference in insight led to a split in 1934, by which the original inhabitants continued their work in another place and the new brothers established a stricter regime under a new name: the Christa Prema Seva Sangha, the "Community of the Service of the Love of Christ." Disappointed, Winslow re-

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[11] Winslow, *The Eyelids of the Dawn*, p. 54. For Tukaram see Jan Peter Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten: Mystiek uit India voor westerse lezers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1996), pp. 78-95.

turned to England to devote his energy to the Oxford Group and the Moral Re-Armament that had emerged from it.

The ashram in Pune slowly declined after the war and was closed in 1963. But in 1972 it gained a new lease on life from a completely different organization. The Anglican Sisters of St. Mary the Virgin (CSMV), together with Roman Catholic nuns of the Society of the Sacred Heart (RSCJ), turned it into an ecumenical women's community. The first *acharya* of the new institute was Sister Vandana (Gool Mary Dhalla). She was originally a Parsi but converted to Roman Catholicism as a young woman. After a few years in the ashram she retreated to the Himalayas and was succeeded by the English Sister Sara Grant (1992-2000), also of the "Sacred Heart." As the choice of the *acharyas* already demonstrates, the new ashram was largely dominated by Roman Catholics. The ideas of Swami Abhishiktananda, largely oriented to the monistic tradition in Hinduism, gave direction to both female *acharyas*.

But the Protestant tradition was not limited to Tirupattur and the old ashram in Pune: Protestants, Western mission staff or Indian believers set up ashrams in numerous other places.[12] Social engagement is always a characteristic of these ashrams, usually with great affinity for the Gandhian movement. Two Christians in the circle of Gandhi's co-workers both set up their own centres, one in the extreme north and the other in the extreme south of India. E. Stanley Jones (1884-1973) established his ashram at the foot of the Himalayan mountains in 1930 (Sat Tal, Nainital Dt.). And Richard Keithahn (1898-1984) retreated to his ashram, the "Rock of Vision," in the hills of Tamilnadu, in Kodaikanal (Dindigul Dt.) after a lifetime of working for the Gandhian movement.

[12] An overview is found in Michael O'Toole, *Christian Ashram Communities in India* (Pune/Indore: Ishvani/Satprakashan, 1983). See also Helen Ralston, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India*, Studies in Religion and Society 20 (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987).

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Roman Catholic Continuation

The history of the Roman Catholic ashrams begins later and ends differently. After India became independent, several ashrams were established by European Catholics in India, some of which exerted a great deal of influence on the church and theology in India and far beyond. The founders were in all cases monastic people searching for a different fulfilment for their monastic calling. India attracted them because of the spiritual tradition of Hinduism. But most were fascinated not by the devotional *bhakti* but by the wisdom of the philosophical systems. The monistic thought of the Vedanta in particular was an irresistible attraction for many Roman Catholic theologians. Their ashrams had, of course, a missionary purpose as well. But the accent on social involvement, so characteristic of the Protestant ashrams, was less strong.

The first to be immensely fascinated by India and to want to lead a monastic life there, was the Frenchman Jules Monchanin (1895-1957).[13] He was a priest in the diocese of Lyon and worked for several years in basic pastoral care. But he became more and more interested in Eastern philosophy and gradually the desire to be a witness to Christ in such a culture arose. When he was struck by double pneumonia, he vowed that if he recovered he would devote his life to the presence of the church in India. He did indeed recover, and did everything he could to fulfil his vow. He joined a congregation that was strongly dedicated to mission work, the Société des auxiliaires des Missions (S.A.M. = Society of Assistants to Missions). He studied Sanskrit and India's religion, and contacted the bishop of Tiruchirapalli. In 1939 he arrived in India and began the task assigned to him: the pastoral care of a few low-class communities.

Jules Monchanin had not come to India for pastoral work and his activities did not exactly fulfil his dream. He actually wanted to live as an Indian monk and witness to Christ in that

[13] For Monchanin see *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam (Fr. J. Monchanin), 1895-1957: A Memorial* (Tiruchirapalli: Saccidananda Ashram, 1959). See also J. Monchanin and Henri le Saux, *Ermites du Saccidânanda: Un essai d'intégration chrétienne de la tradition monastique de l'Inde, (Église vivante)*, 2nd ed. (Tournai/Paris: Casterman, 1957).

way. Here he relied on the ideas developed by Brahmabhandav Upadhyay (1861-1907), one of the first great theologians among the Roman Catholic Indians. Monchanin did call his modest parsonage Bhakti Ashram, but this did not give his life the fulfilment he desired. This changed when an energetic compatriot with the same plans turned to the bishop in Tiruchirapalli. It was the Benedictine monk Henri le Saux (1910-1973), who wanted to pursue his monastic life in a new way in India.[14] In 1950 both men received permission from the bishop to move to the banks of the holy river Kavery. There they established a small hermitage where they wanted to experience the Benedictine contemplative tradition adapted to its Indian context.[15]

The first adjustment was the consistent use of Hindu vocabulary. The place where the ashram was located was called Shantivanam or "Woods of Peace." The hermitage itself received a double name in Sanskrit and English: Saccidananda ashrama and Ashram of the Holy Trinity. The combination of these two names is significant and odd. *Saccidananda* means "being, consciousness, bliss," and is the usual reference for the highest Reality in monistic thinking based on the Vedanta. It is not really an image of God, and certainly not a personal conception of God. Both monks also adopted Indian names. Jules Monchanin became Swami Parama Arubi Anandam —Tamil for "the Blessing of the Highest Formless One," which referred to the Holy Spirit. Dom le Saux took the name Swami Abhishikteshvarananda—Sanskrit for "the Blessing of the Anointed Lord" (Christ), later shortened to Abhishiktananda, "the Blessing of the Anointed."

Both hermits adapted their way of life and religious praxis to their surroundings as well. They dressed in *kavi*, the yellow ochre garment of the Hindu *sannyasi* and wore a Benedictine cross around their neck, with the holy Hindu OM sign (*pranava*) on it. They were concerned with "a complete fidelity to the cus-

[14] For Le Saux, see Vandana, *Swami Abhishiktānanda: The Man and His Teaching, By Some of his Friends and Disciples* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1986); G. Gispert-Sauch, "Christ and the Indian Mystical Tradition: Swami Abhishiktananda," *Jeevadhara* XXVIII (1998): 193-206.

[15] They co-wrote a theological justification of their project, *Ermites du Saccidânanda*.

toms and traditions of India" and with "a Christian incorporation as complete as possible of the monastic and spiritual tradition of India."[16] Nor did their monastery have anything of the character of a Western monastery. They were not concerned with worship in a brotherly community and certainly not with activities for the benefit of society. It was a place of total renunciation of the world, where wisdom and meditation were central. Thus, the desert fathers—to which both hermits regularly referred—who, in the first centuries after Christ, individually retreated to the desolateness of Syria and Egypt are their primary examples from the history of Christianity.

Monchanin was always fascinated by the spirituality of the early church fathers, particularly by the school that he preferred to refer to as the "apophatic" school. This school involves mysticism that has gone beyond naming the deity and approaches the mystery of God exclusively in negative terms. This negative theology, such as that of pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, was an important source of inspiration for him. The highest form of mysticism is that in which one concentrates on the deity instead of on God. By this he means looking at the divine Being as it is in itself and not as it reveals itself to us. The central term "deity" or "godhead" is taken from Paul who speaks in Colossians 2:9 of the "fullness of the godhead (*theotes*)" that is present in Christ. Starting with this text, Monchanin sees a line of apophatic mysticism in history that is directed toward the reality behind the theological concepts of God.[17] In this connection the hymn written by Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330-390) held special meaning for him and for Le Saux:

O God, beyond all things,
How else is it fitting to sing your praises?
How shall a word honour you?
You cannot be expressed through any single word.
How shall the understanding approach you?
You cannot be understood by any mind.
You alone are inexpressible,

[16] Monchanin and Le Saux, *Ermites du Saccidânanda*, p. 55.

[17] J. Monchanin, "In quo habitat omnis plenitudo divinitatis," (outline for a lecture), in: *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, pp. 177-81.

for you have created all things that are said.
You alone are unknowable,
for you have created all things that are thought.[18]

Monachanin and Le Saux have different approaches, certainly if we take into account the great development the latter underwent. From the beginning, Monchanin was more reserved toward Hindu mysticism. While he appreciated it, he nevertheless wanted to retain the central Christian doctrines. He continued to think strictly in Trinitarian terms and could not imagine relativizing the importance of the incarnation of Christ along the lines of monistic thought. He saw the world of India as *praeparatio evangelica*, a kind of continuation of the Old Testament.[19] And he explicitly wrote that, by using the name Saccidananda, the Christian monk attaches a new meaning that was yet unknown and could only be understood through the revelation in Christ.[20] Le Saux's starting point was in the same world of belief, but he eventually became convinced that the Vedanta represented the absolute truth. For him, of course, the question became what Christian doctrine could still add to this. Finally, through Johannine theology, he found the specific meaning in the mystical experience of Jesus Christ himself. Whoever appropriates the mystery of the words "I am" from the gospel of John achieves the same insight as that offered by the *advaita* doctrine.[21] But what was especially determinative for Henri le Saux was the experience of mystical unity that overcame him at one time on the holy mountain Arunachala in the ashram of the extremely monistic teacher Ramana Maharshi

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[18] Gregory of Nazianzus, "Carminum liber I," in: J.-P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologiae cursus completus*, Series Graeca prior, Vol. XXXVI (Paris: Garnier, 1862), 1:29; cf. Monchanin and Le Saux, *Ermites du Saccidânanda*, p. 86; Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience*, rev. ed. (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1984), p. 1.

[19] Monchanin and Le Saux, *Ermites du Saccidânanda*, p. 35.

[20] Monchanin and Le Saux, *Ermites du Saccidânanda*, p. 176; this passage was written by Monchanin and not by Le Saux, cf. *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, p. 18.

[21] Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*; see also Gispert-Sauch, "Christ and the Indian Mystical Tradition."

(1879-1950). Ultimately, all theology had to adapt to that experience.

Monchanin died already in 1957, after seven years of living in the Christian ashram. Henri le Saux continued the project on his own. Shantivanam gradually became a concept not only among Christians in India but also among the Hindus. Le Saux's intensive study of the Hindu tradition led to a number of publications that attracted a great deal of attention. Many people, including foreigners, visited this special place of spirituality. The ashram had not been set up with the intention of providing pastoral care or a place to retreat, but visitors were not turned away. Nevertheless, Le Saux was increasingly attracted by the true *sannyasa* ideal and in the end chose to leave the ashram and retreat from this world as well to the place of choice for Hindu hermits: the Himalaya mountains. In 1968 the ashram acquired a worthy successor to Le Saux in the person of Bede Griffiths.

Bede Griffiths (1906-1993) was an English Benedictine monk who had found his way to India in a way similar to both hermits of Shantivanam.[22] He came from an Anglican family but was not very religious as a young boy. During his studies at Oxford, under the influence of C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), he became more and more engrossed by faith. He also developed an interest in the wisdom literature of other religions, such as the Bhagavad-Gita. His leaning towards becoming a hermit was also evident early in his life. After his studies he lived with two friends in a very sober house in the country. With a romantic yet very rigid attitude, they banned all modern conveniences and established an existence in harmony with nature. The commune also had an increasingly stronger religious slant, with

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[22] Griffiths wrote two autobiographies: *The Golden String* (London: The Harvill Press, 1954) and in 1976 *The Marriage of East and West*. Here we will be using the edition published in 2003 by Medio Media Publishing (Tucson). Various studies on him have appeared. The important ones are: Lourdu Anandam, *The Western Lover of the East: A Theological Enquiry into Bede Griffiths' Contribution to Christology* (Kodaikanal: La Salette Publications, 1998); Wayne Robert Teasdale, *Toward a Christian Vedanta: The Encounter of Hinduism and Christianity according to Bede Griffiths* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1987); Jesu Rajan, *Bede Griffiths and Sannyasa* 2nd ed. (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1997).

communal rituals and severe asceticism. After a year, when the other two chose to marry after all, Bede Griffiths searched for a way to continue his religious-communal existence. He had already developed some feeling for Roman Catholicism and, at the age of 25, he converted to the Roman Catholic Church and entered a monastery almost immediately.

As a monk, he studied Thomism but also took up Eastern philosophy. He was quickly able to link both traditions closely: "The idea of God which is found in Sankara, the great doctor of the Vedanta, is almost identical with that of St Thomas. According to him God is sacchidananda ...."[23] Gradually, Griffiths' great ideal also became that of giving shape to monastic existence in India in an Indian way. In 1955 he was given the opportunity to go to India, where he joined a monastic community of his order in Bangalore. But the relative luxury there did not agree with him: he was seeking the true austerity that, in his opinion, was much more appropriate to the way of life of the large majority of the Indians. In 1958, together with a Belgian Cistercian monk, Francis Mahieu (1911-2002), he established his own ashram at Vagamon (Kottayam Dt., Kerala). The small community was founded on a hill, which had long before been consecrated as a Christian holy place with the stations of the cross and a cross at the top. Thus, the ashram is called Kurishumala, "Hill of the Cross." It is remarkable that, from the start, both founders oriented themselves toward the Syro-Malankar Church, one of the churches united with Rome that follow the Eastern rite. That the ashram prospered is also certainly due to its position as monastery within this church. Young members of the church who had a monastic vocation soon found themselves at this ashram. A *numerus fixus* even had to be invoked to avoid a too large increase in the number of *sannyasis*: the ashram could not handle more than twenty people. Griffiths especially pushed for the promotion of the old West Syrian liturgy, which determines the rite in this church. One of his first publications was a translation into English of the divine office held on week-

[23] Griffiths, *The Golden String*, p. 152

days in this church and thus also in the ashram.[24] The Keralites who joined Rome took this liturgy with them when they left their old Jacobite Church. The Christology in this church was monophysist, which this liturgy obviously reflects. There is a heavy stress on the divinity of Christ, which means that many prayers are directed toward Christ as "our God" and not toward God "through Jesus Christ, our Lord," as is usual in the Latin liturgy. This highly exalted image of Christ fits in well with the Hindu environment!

But Kurishumala Ashram was and is—much more so than the other ashrams—a Christian monastery. This was less satisfying for Griffiths in the long run, which is why he gladly assumed leadership of Shantivanam when Swami Abhishiktananda left. In the experimental ashram on the banks of the Kavery Griffiths could finally give form to that what he had in mind: an ashram with a Hindu setup and closely reflecting the philosophy of the Vedanta. Griffiths also assumed a new name: Swami Dayananda ("the Blessing of Compassion"). Under his leadership the ashram became even more of a meeting place for East and West, for classical philosophy and modern intellectual schools. Bede Griffiths, who was much more intellectual than his predecessor, studied deeply not only Hindu philosophy but also Taoism, Gnosticism, the new physics and New Age thinking. It is typical of him that he, in a holistic approach, attempted to reconcile emotion and rationality with each other and, moreover, to find the similarities in all possible spiritual schools. Many publications, in splendid English, witness to his being well-read and to his broad interests.[25] At times, the differences between the various schools appear, in him, to have disappeared completely: it does not matter whether the mystery of

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[24] Bede Griffiths (transl.), *The Book of Common Prayer of the Syrian Church* (Vagamon: Kurisumala Ashram, s.a.). The title is a good indication of the translator's Anglican background.

[25] Cf. especially Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre* (London: Fount, 1981) (first published in 1976) and *A New Vision of Reality: Western Science, Eastern Mysticism and Christian Faith,* ed. Felicity Edwards (London: Collins, 1989).

existence is called Brahman, Nirvana, Tao or God.[26] Ultimately, however, it concerns something else, a truth behind all truths: "We cannot return to the past forms of Catholicism or Buddhism or Confucianism or Hindu or Islamic orthodoxy. Each religion has to return to its source in the eternal religion."[27]

This pluralistic approach to religion has given rise to much opposition, particularly among Indian Christians. Lourdu Anandam, who wrote a solid study on Griffiths, distinguishes between three phases in his Christological images. In his earliest writings, Griffiths assumes that the aspirations of the various religions find their fulfilment in Christ. This fulfilment theology is followed by a period of inclusive Christological thought: Christ was actually always already present in the various revelations of humanity. In the last years of his life, Griffiths represents more of a theocentric pluralism. It is not Christ but the one indescribable mystery behind all religions that is normative. Anandam concludes that the path Griffiths took should not be the model for the church in India.[28] It is a fact, however, that Griffiths was very important for Shantivanam and for the ashram movement in its entirety. After his death he was very much missed, especially in the ashram on the banks of the Kavery: without the guru, the centre seemed barely feasible.

There are also Roman Catholic ashrams that do not go as far in their approach to Hinduism as Griffiths did. The work of the so-called "Goa Jesuit Swamis" is not very well known in the West, but here we see an important and different approach to ashram life. This concerns a number of Jesuits from the state of Goa, traditionally an area with a strong Christian stamp because of the centuries-long Portuguese rule. Armando Alvares came from this area, crossing the border of the state Karnataka to lead an ascetic life in line with the Hindu model. In 1950 he

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[26] Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, p. 20.

[27] Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, p. 97.

[28] Anandam, *The Western Lover of the East*, p. 278; see also pp. 258-67.

founded an ashram in Deshnur (Belgaum Dt.). In a wonderful combination of Sanskrit and Latin, he called himself Swami Animananda S.J. ("The Blessing of the Spirit").

What is so special about this area is that the Hindu *bhakti* movement of the *Virashaivas* is so prominent. These *Virashaivas* or *Lingayatas* were originally devotees of Shiva but have become monotheists and have distanced themselves from the temple cultus and the priesthood. The ashram in Deshnur is in keeping with this form of Hinduism and externally appears to be very similar to a *Virashaiva* monastery (*matha*).[29] The purpose of this ashram is to engage in pastoral care and to preach the Gospel to the surrounding villages. At the moment there are four swamis working there. They seldom step into the limelight and do not publish any books or articles about their work. But, more than many other ashram *sadhus*, they have been accepted in Hindu society. The Goa Jesuit Swamis continue a long tradition of the Jesuits that began with Roberto de Nobili (1577-1656) and João de Brito (1647-1693): a far-reaching adaptation to the surrounding culture in the service of preaching the Gospel. Their witness of Christ is not spectacular, but it is effective.



Types of Ashrams

In addition to those mentioned above, there are many more Christian ashrams in India that have not had as much influence.

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[29] I visited the ashram in Deshnur in February of 1989. The photo shows the sacred room. As is appropriate for *Virashaivas*, there are no images. There are inscriptions with texts (Hindu and Christian) and the tabernacle has unmistakably been given the form of a *linga*.

It is not always clear what is a true ashram and what is not. Kurishumala Ashram developed more and more into a normal monastery within the Syro-Malankar tradition. And in certain parts of India it is not unusual to call a common village rectory the "ashram." True ashrams are more than that. In every case they are characterized by a strong adaptation to the Hindu ideal of the *sannyasa*. One aspect of this is certainly the central position of the guru. Boundaries fluctuate of course and, moreover, there are clearly various types of Christian ashrams. Richard Taylor has attempted in an article to outline a typology of Christian ashrams.[30] He uses the concepts *khadi* and *kavi*, which are separated, in his view, by a world of differences.

Khadi is the usual name for the rough cotton material that is the result of the cottage industry of the Gandhians. The Mahatma charged his followers to spin a certain amount of cotton thread each day. His intention was to undermine the import of factory-made textiles by the development of village industry. But spinning had additionally a deeper, sacred meaning. It was a meditative occupation, intended to promote serenity and harmony with surrounding nature. Gandhi himself could be found behind his simple spinning wheel daily and for his followers it was the way of displaying their solidarity with his movement. Wearing clothing made from the white, undyed *khadi* was a form of protest. It is characteristic that Western missionaries who thus displayed their loyalty to the independence movement could count on repression. In 1930 R.R. Keithahn was even threatened with deportation by the British authorities because of his clothing.

Kavi is the name for the ochre garment that has been worn by Hindu ascetics since ancient times. In its simplest form, it consists of one large seamless piece of fabric that is wrapped around the lower part of the body. The fabric is dyed with clay, ochre, thereby acquiring a colour that varies from reddish to yellow. The clothing can also be more extensive than just one piece: a wraparound skirt plus a shawl, or a kind of cassock that covers the entire body. It is the dye that is normative: someone wearing *kavi* can rely on being recognized as an ascetic. This

[30] Richard W. Taylor, "From Khadi to Kavi: Toward a Typology of Christian Ashrams," *Religion and Society* 24 (1977): 19-37.

usually means being treated with much honour by all layers of the population.

Taylor sees the ashrams as being on one line, with *khadi* at one extreme and *kavi* at the other. The oldest ashrams leaned more toward the *khadi* extreme. Both Jesudason and Forrester-Paton as well as Winslow had a strong affinity with the Gandhian movement. The most important Christian follower of Gandhi, C.F. Andrews, was also involved in the establishment of both ashrams. There were differences of course. For both doctors in Tirupattur, social services were more important than they were in the ashram in Pune, which was oriented towards mystic praxis. In that regard, Pune could be categorized as more toward the *kavi* side. But the actual *kavi* ashrams are hermitages that were founded by Christian monks after Independence, such as Kurishumala and Shantivanam. The founders were loyal to an independent Indian state, which the Gandhian movement had produced, but they were not enthusiastic about all aspects of Gandhi's legacy. It was typical of Jules Monchanin that he wanted nothing to do with *khadi*: he viewed Gandhi's encouragement of village industry as resistance to an irreversible evolution.[31]

The concepts *khadi* and *kavi* are certainly suitable for characterizing an important difference in orientation between the various ashrams. Some confusion is obvious—also in Taylor. After all, wearing a *kavi* was also practiced in the Gandhian-oriented ashrams, although it was not a rule. Jesudason also wore ochre sometimes, and even *acharya* Keithahn, whose ashram is situated right at the *khadi* extreme, wore "a saffron cassock" on important occasions.[32]

Finally, it is important to establish that the *khadi-kavi* polarity demonstrates a vigorous overlapping with the "Protestant-Roman Catholic" dichotomy. Even though not all Protestant ashrams are as strongly oriented to social activities, their involvement in the Gandhian movement is generally stronger than what we encounter in the Roman Catholic ashrams. The

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[31] *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, p. 21.

[32] Ralph Richard Keithahn, *Pilgrimage in India: An Autobiographical Fragment*, Indian Christian Thought Series 13 (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1973), p. 64.

latter are without exception at the *kavi* extreme, although there are differences, of course.

How does an image of Jesus Christ arise in the culture of these various ashrams? The preceding historical overview has laid down certain building blocks for this. We will now provide a five-point outline of the Christology of the ashram movement, in both its *khadi* and *kavi* forms.

Jesus as Sadhu

The first thing that one notices is that all ashram inhabitants link their way of life with the life of Jesus. One would expect the ashrams that fall under the *kavi* category to pay particular attention to the practice of prayer and the mystique of Jesus Christ. But there are also repeated appeals to the life of Christ in the circles of the ashrams of the *khadi* extreme to justify their choices. Jesus is seen as a *sadhu*, a holy man who devotes his entire life to religion and is an example for others. What Jesudason writes, in a passionate defense of his choice for celibacy about Jesus as the ideal *brahmachari*, is typical.[33] The example of Jesus is that he denied himself a sexual relationship and also relativized his family ties, founding instead a family with all of his spiritual brothers and sisters. The ashram in Tirupattur is also intended to function in this way, as the "Family of Christ," for those who have distanced themselves from the bonds of marriage and family.

Jesus Christ is the pre-eminent example for Jesudason not only with regard to celibacy. The Gospel also sets the tone for the ashram inhabitants with regard to possessions and social positions. Jesudason emphasizes that, like many other theologians of the ashram movement, Jesus led an itinerant existence: "The Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). The call to the rich young man to sell all of his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor has significance for the ashram. Jesus' example calls one to renounce one's possessions and to live in a way that does justice to his call for self-denial, to take up the cross to follow him.

[33] Jesudason, *Reminiscences of a Pilgrim of Life*, pp. 138-39.

Jesudason saw the importance of Christ for the ashram especially in the emptying (*kenosis*) as described in Philippians 2.[34] Just as the Lord distanced himself from his position, so must his followers make their choices in life. If they choose for an existence in an ashram, they do so following the example of Christ. And yet the *khadi* ashrams do not present Jesus' renunciation of the world as an absolute: it is not a goal in itself but a means to be of service to one's fellow beings. Winslow in particular also continues to see Christ as the Lord of the good life, who allows all room for the happiness of existence in the world and therefore certainly does not reject marriage, for example.[35]

In the later *kavi* ashrams this line of Christ's example is taken to the extreme. Both founders of the Shantivanam write without hesitation that if Jesus had arrived in the world in India he certainly would have been a *sannyasi*.[36] For them, there is no doubt that they must choose the most absolute renunciation of the world because it was the way of Christ. And what is emphatically expressed in their book has been the underlying idea for many ashrams founded by Roman Catholics. Nor is the idea unfamiliar to Western hermits and monks. But by comparing it with the Hindu *sannyasa*, which entails a complete rejection of a normal existence, this image of Christ becomes even more radicalized. One must seriously doubt whether it can be maintained that the gospel writers depict Jesus' life as a *sannyasi*, with its extreme consequence of a complete break with society. That comparison would certainly have arisen in connection with John the Baptist. But the gospels portray Jesus as someone who was a part of the lives of people in the world: he sits with them at table, he attends their weddings and their synagogue services, he speaks to men and women and ultimately deliberately takes part in the suffering and death of people. His own words emphasize how his attitude differs from John's renunciation of the world: "For John the Baptist came neither eating

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[34] S. Jesudason, *Unique Christ and Indigenous Christianity*, Indian Christian Thought Series 4 (Bangalore: The Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1966), p. 16.

[35] Winslow, *The Eyelids of the Dawn*, p. 99.

[36] Monchanin and Le Saux, *Ermites du Saccidânanda*, p. 42.

bread nor drinking wine .... The Son of Man came eating and drinking ...” (Luke 7:33-34).

One aspect of the *sadhu* figure that everyone in the ashram movement connects to Jesus is his character as a teacher. It is typical of the Hindu *guru* to transfer knowledge and insight by means of his way of life amidst his followers. Jesus is also viewed as a guru in this way. His teaching has to do not only with his words but with his whole way of being among people, which illuminates the meaning of his appearance. In the Hindu experience, a guru is, by definition, a divine figure, a *gurudeva*, for it is through his way of acting that people come to God.

From the beginning people in various ashrams have clarified the meaning of Christ by presenting him as a guru. Hinduism has a word for a teacher of world significance: *jagadguru* or world teacher. It is significant that Winslow, in the early years of his ashram life, wrote an article called “*Jagadguru*, or the World Significance of Jesus Christ.”[37] When his ashram was founded it was stipulated that there was to be no guru or leader in the ashram other than Jesus Christ, “our ever present Master.”[38] This was the starting point of many ashrams, in the Roman Catholic communities as well. Sister Vandana, Henri le Saux’s student and later *acharya* of the ashram in Pune, wrote that for a long time she thought that in a Christian ashram the only guru could be the Risen Christ. But upon further reflection she chose for the Indian tradition of a human guru as the central figure in an ashram.[39] We already saw that sooner or later in many ashrams the founder functioned as the guru. This does not detract from the fact that in the ashram movement the old Hindu concept of the guru as god-man teacher became the most favourite reference to Christ.

Jesus Christ is a guru because through his teaching and way of life he reveals God to others and gives them the insight they need. Le Saux describes that in a typically Hindu way by using the concept *darshana*. This refers to the believer seeing a

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[37] In the *Calcutta Guardian*, 1924.

[38] See Noreen, *Crossroads of The Spirit*, p. 63.

[39] Vandana, *Gurus, Ashrams and Christians* (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1980), p. 32.

divinity or guru, through which the believer participates in the divine reality. A guru "gives *darshana*" or allows people to come to a deeper insight or undergo a mystical experience through contact with him. Le Saux writes on Christ as guru: "Jesus, in the course of a few years, gave his *darshan* freely to his disciples and readily allowed himself to be seen by crowds of his contemporaries."[40] By writing about Jesus' contact with his contemporaries in this typical manner, he makes clear how the old Hindu concept of the guru can serve Christology.

Jesus as Jivanmukta

The ashrams did not all join the same school of thought in Hinduism. The old Protestant ashrams were the most oriented to the tradition of *bhakti*, loving devotion, in Hinduism. In this Christian community the devotion to Christ was experienced in the same passionate way as the love for Krishna, Rama or Shiva in the various *bhakti* movements. Winslow was very impressed by the religious poetry of Tukaram,[41] seeing there a model for the loving worship of Christ in his own ashram. And just as he appropriated the *bhakti* verses in the Marathi-speaking part of India in that language, in the same way for the Tamil Jesudason the poetry of the great *bhakta* Manikka-vacakar in Jesudason's mother tongue was the classic example of inspiring devotion.[42] There appeared to be affinity with the *bhakti* among some Roman Catholic ashram inhabitants as well. This holds for the Goa swamis, for example, with their intense involvement in the Virashaiva mysticism. But for most of the Roman Catholic ashrams there is another school that is the main source of inspiration, and that is the monistic doctrine based on the Vedanta.

Advaita or monism is the conviction that ultimately there is only one reality. Everything, including the human soul, is part of this one divine existence. Anything that presents itself to the

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[40] Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, 4th rev. ed. (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K, 1975), p. 5.

[41] Winslow, *The Eyelids of the Dawn*, pp. 52-53. For Tukaram see Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten*, pp. 78-95.

[42] S. Jesudason, *Unique Christ and Indigenous Christianity*, p. 41. For Manikka-vacakar see Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten*, pp. 27-42.

people as existing separately is merely *maya* (blinding). The *advaita* that was developed by Shankara in the ninth century as a philosophical system harks back to the classic writings of the Vedanta, particularly the secret books that are called "Upanishad." Here we find the doctrine of the supreme Reality as the indescribable Brahman, which is one and the same as the core of being human, the *atman*. For Roman Catholic ashram leaders such as Henri le Saux and Bede Griffiths, Sister Vandana and Sara Grant, this is the wisdom *par excellence* at which the encounter with Hinduism must be aimed. Here we are completely immersed in the sphere of the *kavi*.

What does this mean now for the view of Jesus Christ? Most theologians in this school of thought are particularly enervated by the mystical experience and the complete understanding of Jesus himself. They regard him as a *jivanmukta*, i.e. someone who has achieved redemption (*moksha*) already during his lifetime. Whoever reads the message of the gospels from the perspective of the monistic tradition discovers easy points of contact—but if this does justice to the message of Christ is another question. But it is not difficult to guess how, according to the monist view, Jesus' own experience of unity is to be understood. Obviously the gospel according to John yields many statements that can be interpreted in this way.

Henri le Saux especially goes into depth on this. He is of the opinion that the monistic doctrine, the *advaita*, as a whole is not completely foreign to Christian revelation but is already present in the Gospel.[43] He is even able to refer to the gospel book in question as "the Johannine Upanishad." He sees the link between the *advaita* doctrine and the Christian faith in the "realization of the unity" by Jesus himself: "The experience of the Absolute to which India's mystical tradition bears such powerful witness is all included in Jesus' saying: "My Father and I are one."[44] This text (John 10:30) always arises when the discussion in India concerns the relationship between *advaita* and Christianity. Indeed, Henri le Saux posits that this text may not be isolated and there is certainly a difference between both religious systems. But, for him, judging by the quotation above,

[43] Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, p. 194.

[44] Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, p. 82.

the unity of Jesus with the Father is proof that the *advaita* is also present in the Gospel.

The various "I am" sayings of Christ in the gospel according to John are also linked with the experience of unity. And thus there are many other quotes that are introduced, such as Jesus' words "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). But Le Saux finds most convincing the use of the word "Abba," by which Jesus addresses the heavenly father: "The experience of intimacy, of immanence, or rather of non-distance which Jesus had under the sign of ABBA was known in India under the sign of atma/Brahman: aham Brahma asmi."[45] In this citation from his diaries Le Saux goes further than in his publications, although he does speculate in the latter on the concept of Abba. But here, without any reserve, the core text of the Vedanta ("I am Brahman" (Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad I.4.3)) is linked to the mystical experience of Jesus. And so he becomes a *jivanmukta* entirely.

The Eternal Christ

For ashram theology, Jesus' way of life and his own relationship to God form an important source of inspiration, but more must be said on this. It cannot only be about a person's relationship to God in Palestine during the first century of our calendar—whether or not this was in the form of monistic mysticism. For all theologies in the ashram movement, the important question is how the historical appearance of Jesus of Nazareth can be linked with the history of other religions. Could the piety and the wisdom in the long history of Hinduism be unrelated to Christ?

Those who think Christocentrically and at the same time have acknowledged much truth in other religions cannot imagine there is no link. Such a link is generally assumed in the ashrams—of whatever school. It means that, like a cosmic figure, Christ rises above the history of the Palestine of the first century. Everything that humans have come to know about

[45] From Henri le Saux's diaries, cited by G. Gispert-Sauch, "Christ and the Indian Mystical Tradition," p. 202. In his diaries Le Saux often expresses himself more radically that in his works intended for publication; regarding "abba" see also Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, pp. 77-90.

God in one way or another does not go beyond this universal Christ. This is the underlying principle of ashram theology, even though it has, of course, given rise to many formulations and various conceptions have arisen.

In the Protestant ashrams there is a general preference for the term "eternal Christ." What *acharya* Keithahn of the Kodaikanal Ashram Fellowship writes is typical:

> Into this culture [India] came the influence of Jesus Christ, of his "love" and "truth"—the tradition of which goes back to the first century of this era. But even more I would stress the common Source of "the Eternal Christ" who sat with the Buddha under the Bo tree. We are still to recognise this "Common Christ" that brings glimpses of the Eternal Truth to us all.[46]

In Jesudason as well we encounter similar ideas with the same terminology. The primary example for him is not the Budha's enlightenment, but he does see the devotional tradition of the *bhakti* as a point of contact. He expresses this link in ornate language: "Poets and prophets of this land have abundantly proved their experience of the *eternal* Christ (though strangers to the *historic* Christ) through their lives, teachings, and songs."[47] As an example, he quotes a poem by the famous Tamil *bhakti* poet Manikka-vacakar:

> O Thou whose love is tender sweet,
> More than the nursing mother fond,
> My sinful stony heart it melts,
> Thy light pervades my inmost heart,
> Thou pourest joy like honey sweet,
> O all pervading treasure Thou!
> Thee I have chased, Thee I have caught
> Sublime Shiva, where wilt Thou go?[48]

It is clear that, for Jesudason, such a deep awareness of God, even with a clear notion of sin and mercy, cannot be unrelated

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[46] Keithahn, *Pilgrimage in India*, p. 60.

[47] Jesudason, *Unique Christ and Indigenous Christianity*, p. 41.

[48] Here Jesudason gives a free translation of Tiruvacakam XXXVII:9.

to Christ. Winslow would not have experienced the poetry of Tukaram differently.

For Protestant theologians, it is understandably important to find a basis for these thoughts in the Bible, and they always find this basis in the gospel of John. John does not hesitate to use the Greek concept of *logos* to outline the meaning of Christ. It is nothing less than the Word, through which everything came into existence, that appears as Jesus Christ in human form on earth: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The philosophy of the heathen Greeks can, apparently, provide the terminology for describing the mystery of the incarnation. So, divine revelation must have been present in non-Christian philosophy. The divine *logos* is not limited to working only within the Christian tradition.

This is how Jesudason reasons, and it is remarkable how he traces this operation of the Word in India as well. He places the *logos* on the same level as the holy syllable of Hinduism, OM, and he identifies them completely. If John had lived in India, he would have started his gospel with "In the beginning was OM, OM was with God and OM was God."[49] In the Hindu tradition OM is a holy sound that has primarily a ritual and spiritual meaning. There are countless speculations that link the letters that form the sound (usually regarded as a three-lettered word, AUM) with gods or aspects of the supreme Reality. Finally, the written letters have become a holy symbol of the Hindu's religion; the symbol is affixed to temples, banners and books to inspire veneration. With respect to that, one can object to the identification of *logos* and OM: the concept OM has much more of a religious content than *logos*.

One can see how the concept of the eternal Christ develops in the concrete details of ashram life. If Christ is already present in the Hindu world, much of the ritual can be taken over in the Christian worship service. And that is exactly what happens in all ashrams. In the old Christa Seva Sangh in Pune, the Gayatri mantra was used as a response to the call to lift one's heart to Christ. In this ashram—but also in many others—the famous text of the Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad was used as a Christian prayer:

[49] Jesudason, *Unique Christ and Indigenous Christianity*, pp. 4, 40.

From falsehood lead me to truth;
From darkness lead me to light;
From death lead me to immortality.

Henri le Saux sees the expression of a prayer in OM that is more encompassing than ordinary prayers: "OM is the prayer of man, and through man of the whole creation, for the coming of that final kingdom proclaimed by Jesus."[50] He even expresses reserve regarding recommending the use of OM to Christians, not because it would not fit into their faith but because it is too elevated for those who have not had any deep inner experience.

The presence of Christ is experienced in this way in the spirituality of Hinduism. And in this way the new ashram in Pune can justify using, at the pre-eminent celebration of the presence of Christ, i.e. the Eucharist, texts from a Upanishad in which the self states in the unity with the Brahman that has been realized: "I am food. I am food. I am food" (Taittiriya Upanishad III:10: 5).[51] And there are, of course, many opportunities of this kind. The hymn about the cosmic primal human who is cut into pieces by the gods (Purusha-sukta) can be linked during the Easter vigil to the crucifixion of Jesus. The text about the wounded person who bleeds like a tree losing sap can find an echo in the episode of the crucified Christ who was stabbed in his side by a soldier (Rig-Veda X:90 and Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad III:9:28).[52]

One may ask if we are not too far removed from the historical events that are the basis of the preaching of the gospel. The figure of Jesus Christ seems to fade if everything in the history of humankind points to him. Speculations on the eternal Christ, however valuable they may be in the encounter with Hinduism, seem to have little to do with the Jewish man from Nazareth. A pneumatological approach would seem to bear more fruit in the

[50] Abhishiktananda, *Prayer*, p. 68.

[51] See Sara Grant, "Shared Prayer and Sharing of Scriptures," in: Paul Puthanangady (ed.), *Sharing Worship: Communicatio in Sacris* (Bangalore: National Biblical, Catechetical & Liturgical Centre, 1988), pp. 468, 473.

[52] See Sara Grant, "Shared Prayer and Sharing of Scriptures," pp. 471, 473.

search in the ashrams for a way to link one's own belief in salvation history with the wisdom of other religions. After all, the Spirit blows where it will. God has revealed himself in a unique way in the life history of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of God will continue to illuminate that secret to humans again and again. But could that same Spirit not be active among the nations in many different ways?

Jesus as Cosmic Figure

And yet, one must admit that there is much more Christ—also in the New Testament—than simply the history of Jesus of Nazareth. Some New Testament letters evoke a cosmic image of Christ: he is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and it can be said of him that: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). This is a hymn of praise by a community that lives in astonishment at what they have experienced in the history of Jesus of Nazareth. The hymn exalts the risen Lord to a supernatural figure who appears to determine everything for those who praise him. Here too, the most highly exalted figure of Christ cannot be separated from the historical events around Jesus of Nazareth. But it remains a fact that he is portrayed as an all-encompassing, cosmic figure.

Bede Griffiths joins in with this and similar texts when he develops a Christology in which the cosmic figure is central.[53] He emphasizes that, according to the hymn in Colossians 1, Christ is not so much God but the image of God. In the figure of Christ God, who as "the invisible" has no form, acquires a perceptible shape. Immediately here already Griffiths sees a parallel with Indian thought. According to the hymn in Philippians 2, Christ was originally "in the form of God." The word "form" (*morphē* in Greek) is *murti* in Sanskrit, and a not insignificant part of the Hindu tradition consists precisely in the search for a "form" in which the invisible godhead can be expressed. An interesting detail is that in everyday Hindu jargon *murti* can mean idol.

[53] Particularly in *A New Vision of Reality*; on Griffiths see especially Anandam, *The Western Lover of the East*.

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God. In contrast to much Indian theology, Griffiths does not hover above history. He wants to place all emphasis on the historical events of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In his view, incarnation is clearly different from the Hindu *avatara* because the Christian faith thinks in historical categories and not mythic ones. Thus Jesus Christ is a Christ figure who emerges from history, and that history is characterized by the self-understanding of Jesus. He identifies with both the Son of Man in Daniel and the suffering Servant of the Lord in Deutero-Isaiah. Griffiths emphasizes that the combination of both Old Testament terms point to Christ's uniqueness. No one had ever before linked these two concepts, until both became associated with Jesus. This illuminates his significance as the representative of humankind.

The Bible uses various images to indicate how Christ represents the whole of humanity. Griffiths obviously refers to the way in which Paul writes about Christ as the new Adam: "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). But the text that his death served to "create in himself one new man" (Ephesians 2:15) also refers to the same thing. Therefore Jesus is a cosmic figure who represents the whole of humanity.

It is here that, for Griffiths, the connection to other religions is found. He believes he can demonstrate that many traditions include the concept of a cosmic primal man who was viewed as the prototype of the whole of humankind. In connection with Hinduism he refers to the *purusha*, in the very ancient hymn found in the Rig-Veda. This is a creation myth in which a giant primal man is central. This *purusha* is the origin of everything that exists: "He is the Man who is all this, whatever has been and is to be. He is the ruler of immortality" (Rig-Veda X.90.2).[54] It is his ritual slaughter by the gods that gives existence a beginning—from his limbs the different castes of humankind arise.

Bede Griffiths sees a similar archetype for humankind in many religions and cultures. He thus places the *tathagata* of later Buddhism within the same framework and believes he can

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[54] The translation is from: Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (London: Penguin Books, 1981), p. 30.

find this in Islam as well, in the idea of the "perfect human." But he does bring a great deal from very different ways of thinking together. The desire to arrive at an all-encompassing approach that can include every tradition makes Griffiths argument weaker than is necessary. And the increasingly strong tendency in the last years of his life to arrive at a theocentric pluralism in Christology also tends to repress the characteristics of the Christian faith.

But in itself, his stress on the position of Christ as representative of human beings is very valuable. And he is right when he posits that it is here that the figure of Christ can become an appealing figure in the context of Hinduism. The Vedic verses on the *purusha* are not exactly suited to being placed simply alongside biblical texts. But a Christology that assumes the concept of *purusha* offers the Hindu recognition of something with which he is familiar and the Christian a new awareness of the cosmic aspect in the biblical image of Christ.

Christ in Saccidananda

The ashrams of the *kavi* type were strongly oriented from the very beginning to the monistic tradition of Hinduism. The writings of the Vedanta and the *advaita* doctrine of Shankara exercised a great pull on the ashram inhabitants. We have already seen that the crosses Monchanin and Le Saux wore around their necks had the OM symbol carved in the centre. Le Saux writes that this combination was intended as "a solemn affirmation that the Christ revealed in history is the very *Brahman* itself, the object of all the contemplations of the *Rishis*."[55] This remark, although written in the memorial book for Monchanin, is nevertheless Le Saux's. Monchanin was much more reticent in linking the Christian faith and Hinduism. He may have worn the OM symbol out of respect for the Hindu environment in which he wanted to live, but he certainly did not become an *advaitin*. Amazed, he observes how the Hindus in this school attach little value to their personality and even "contemplate with equanimity, even with anticipated happiness, the loss of *their* personality by absorption into the *infinite* Being-Conscious-

[55] In: *Swami Parama Arubi Ananadam*, p. 17.

ness-and-Bliss (Sat-cit-ananda)."[56] Griffiths, their successor at Shantivanam, also goes a long way in the direction of the monistic mysticism but ultimately wants nothing to do with the erasing of one's personality.

Henri le Saux's goal for his life was increasingly to become absorbed into *Saccidananda*. Initially, he still wanted to retain the distinction between the personal image of God in the Christian faith and the impersonal Reality of monistic thinking. But by the end of his life he became convinced that the Christian faith can be nothing other than *advaita*. His own mystical experience on the path of the Vedanta led him to this conviction. Now there is only the question of how Christ can have a place in the world of the *advaita*.

Le Saux distinguishes sharply between the historical Jesus and the cosmic Christ. It even becomes unclear where the two are still connected. If he begins from below in his Christology, then he sees Jesus as a *jivanmukta*, a person who during his life attained unity with the All. Jesus' mystical experience ("I am") then becomes an example for the believer, who must come to the same redemptive insight. But the cosmic Christ also has a place in Le Saux's monistic theology – as the second component of *Saccidananda*.

Le Saux places the Christian Trinity on the same level as the Supreme Reality as it is referred to in the *advaita* teaching by the terms *Sat*, *Cit* and *Ananda*. These terms mean Being, Consciousness and Blessedness, respectively, and are found in the original Vedanta writings, appearing separately in many Upanishads. But the contraction *Saccidananda* is of a later date. In the *advaita* doctrine of Shankara (ninth century) this concept becomes one of the descriptions of Brahman, the supreme Reality. The term gives rise, of course, to numerous speculations as to the nature of that exalted Being, which is actually indescribable.

For a Christian like Le Saux this conceptual apparatus yields the opportunity to consider a new way of thinking about

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[56] J. Monchanin, "The Christian Approach to Hinduism" (article in *India Missionary Bulletin* [June 1952]), included in: *Swami Parama Arubi Anandam*, pp. 171-76; quotation found on p. 175.

the Trinity and to describe Christ within it.[57] In *Sat*, Being, he sees the Father of the Trinity, but this Being is unknowable in itself: "He is the Abyss of Silence." But then there is the Son who flows from this source like a stream of water. "Cit is the self-awakening of Being, its coming to manifestation within itself." This manifestation of Being is not different from the Light that illuminates every person, as the prologue to the gospel of John states. But with equal ease Le Saux is able to introduce the wisdom of an Upanishad in this context.

> The seers in old time had an intuition of this very pure self-awareness lying at the very source of their being as well as at the ultimate horizon of their thought, an intuition of that which unfailingly escapes the grasp of the devas, that is, of man's intellect and will. (cf. Kena Up. 3)

In his view, there is no difference between the mystical experience of monistic Hindus and Christians. "As the Father awakes to himself in me, and in me contemplates his only Son, so he does in every one of my brethren."

Here the figure of Christ is entirely embedded in the mystical experience of the *advaita*. What happens here is actually the opposite of Bede Griffiths' *purusha* Christology. There it was an attempt to give a human face to the cosmic figure that represents all of humankind. Here it is the impersonal depiction of Being, unfolding in Consciousness, that indicates the cosmic figure of Christ. But both trains of thought are one in the characteristic groping for that which is the most all-encompassing. Whoever wears *kavi* cannot think highly enough of Christ.

The ashram movement in its various theological approaches developed new views about the mystery of Jesus Christ. Although one can object to some elements of ashram theology, life in the ashrams has certainly proved fruitful. It has caused believers in and outside of India to reflect anew on that which is peculiar to Christian faith and that which is valuable in other religions. It is with good reason that Van Bergen concluded his dissertation on the *sannyasa* with: "Baptizing the homeless existence means expressing the fact that in Christ God

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[57] See Abhishiktananda, *Saccidananda*, pp. 178-81, from which the quotes that follow are taken.

is always with us, but, for the Christian as well, always in a refreshingly different way."[58]

[58] Ludger Franz Maria van Bergen, *Licht op het leven van religieuzen: Sannyasa-dipika* (Nijmegen: Thoben, 1975), thesis XVI.

Alfred Thomas



From the beginning the ashram movement tried to match the design and layout of the buildings to the surrounding culture. Thus, in 1928, a chapel was designed in the Christa Seva Sangha in Pune in which the Hindu tradition was normative.[1] It was a faithful imitation of one of the countless small edifices, constructed all over the country to accommodate images of gods. "Shrines" of this kind are not intended as places for community worship services. Passersby pause for a moment in connection with the sanctity of the place and perhaps bring a small sacrifice. The building served for years to mark the religious character of the community. It was finally replaced by a new, larger structure.

The daily prayer services of the ashram community were held in a room on the second floor, which was designed rather traditionally as a Christian prayer room with an altar, antependia, brass cross and sanctuary lamp. In this prayer room were also two paintings by the Anglican artist Alfred Thomas, which gave a strong Indian accent to the space. Both paintings were of Christ, the one of Jesus deep in prayer and the other of Jesus crucified. The members of the ashram community clearly felt affinity for this artist's work. In 1932 they included a painting by Thomas in the Christmas issue of their periodical, while hav-

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[1] The drawing shown here is by K.G. Mathew, and has been taken from K.G. Mathew and Cecil Hargreaves, *25 Indian Churches* (Calcutta: Bishop College, 1975), p. 22.

ing also issued a series of reproductions of his work earlier that year. For that matter, the Roman Catholic painter Angelo da Fonseca, who had lived for a long time in the ashram, was also very much appreciated and supported.

It was completely in line with the task the members of the ashram community had set for themselves to promote such artistic expression. After all, it concerned an inculturation of the Gospel in the world of Hinduism, and it was artists especially who, being able to understand the language of images, could make an important contribution here. It is certainly not surprising that Alfred Thomas was the favourite in the circle of the Christa Seva Sangha. There were few artists who depicted so many aspects of Christ's work and went as far as he did in adapting his subject matter to Hindu culture. He depicts Christ as an exalted *sannyasi*, sometimes clearly with the Buddha's features and at other times bearing a strong resemblance to a divine *avatara* like Krishna. He also reflected something of a supratemporal reality: the eternal Christ who descended into history.

Alfred David Thomas was born in Agra into a Christian family. His was educated at the art academy in Lucknow, which was strongly oriented toward classical Hindu iconography. He later took lessons at the centre of the Bengalese renaissance, with Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) and Nandalal Bose (1882-1966).[2] Thomas worked in Delhi for many years and then settled in Chelsea, England, in the second half of his life where he kept a studio until his death. He was a member of the Anglican Church and his affinity with the high-church experience of the mystery of the faith is clearly visible in his work. And that affinity was mutual. It was precisely the "High Church" mission organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, that was responsible for the publication that made him world-famous. It is a book containing 24 reproductions of his paintings of themes from the Gospel. It is usually

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[2] See the intermezzo on Nandalal Bose in this volume, pp. 159-60.

quoted in accordance with the modest title on the cover: *The Life of Christ by an Indian Artist*.[3]

A characteristic painting in this series is *The Woman Taken in Adultery*.[4] It is a depiction of the episode described in John 8: 1-11. Experts in the law and Pharisees bring a woman to Jesus who had been caught in the act of adultery. They point out to Jesus that the law demands stoning for such an offense, but Jesus reminds them of their own guilt by saying: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

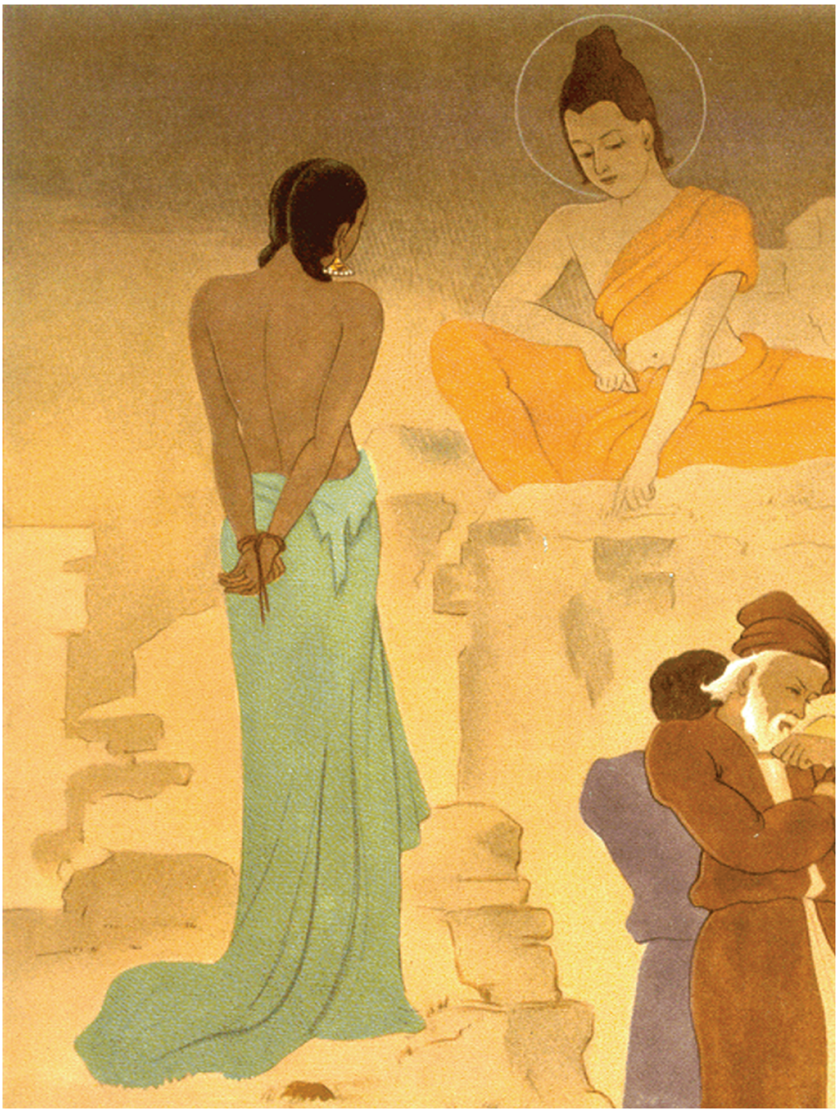
Thomas portrayed Jesus here in a very specific way: Jesus is clothed in *kavi*, the ochre garment of the Hindu or Buddhist *sannyasi*. His light skin colour, in clear contrast to the others in the painting, reinforces the impression of holiness. Particularly striking (and very suggestive!) is that Christ is placed high above the other figures. The gospel's statement that Jesus wrote with his finger on the ground is presented in a very special way by the painter. By having Christ seated in the half-lotus position with his hands stretching downwards, the painter invokes a scene from a whole other world. We see Gautama, the Buddha, before us in one of his fixed poses, the *bhumisparshamudra*. This is the image that the Buddha, after his enlightenment, touches the earth to call it to be a witness that he has obtained enlightenment and will bring the proper message. In this connection another detail is given extra significance. The Christ figure's hair is tied up in a knot above the head, as ascetics often do. But this also invokes a Buddhist image: the bump on the top of Buddha's head (*ushnisha*), which tradition says characterized the Buddha.

Also striking are Jesus' closed eyes, which expresses distance and contemplation. This passage in the gospel gives the occasion for this by the repeated report of Jesus writing on the ground. But in Alfred Thomas' painting more is going on than Jesus simply being lost in the words he is writing. In this paint-

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[3] The title page does indicate the name of the painter: *The Life of Christ: Paintings by Alfred Thomas, London* (first printing 1948).

[4] Alfred Thomas, *The Life of Christ by an Indian Artist*, 2nd ed. (London: The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, 1961), p. 37.



ing he seems to be above the earthly conflict in all respects. What is happening on the ground level between the experts and the woman cannot move him. His words of wisdom will settle the conflict, but he is not personally involved in it.

Christ does not look at the woman nor at her accusers. Here we should point out a rather sensual trait in this painting. The woman's sari has been torn and her wrists are tied together behind her back. The experts, who are literally standing below, have apparently not spared her in any way. She now stands, with her upper body exposed before Jesus. According to the standards of the Hindu community, she is in an extremely embarrassing position. But Christ does not look at her. The great shame that looking at her would surely arouse is spared her. On the other hand, the painter thus shows how, for him, Christ does not allow himself to be influenced by eroticism and desire. In another painting, "The Temptation," Christ rejects Satan, who appears to him as a naked woman, with the same cast-down look.[5] He does not surrender to sexual urges and can rise above the struggle that those urges cause among people.

In the eyes of Westerners, Thomas' Christ often has an ethereal, unearthly appearance. His thin, graceful figure and his refined gestures are most likely experienced as feminine or feeble. But one should remember that the painter is using the pictorial language of Hindu mythology, where this is a way of depicting a divine form. And in this tradition gods can be powerful heroes, like Rama, or passionate lovers, like Krishna.[6] The reproach of apparent docetism is therefore not justified. One can object to this aesthetic which has been taken very far. The discerning Christ nowhere seems to bear the traces of suffering —not in Gethsemane and also not on Golgotha. And the prophecy of the suffering Servant of the Lord (He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we

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[5] Thomas, *The Life of Christ*, p. 17.

[6] Richard Taylor points out correctly that female divinities are depicted very differently in this world. He also asserts that through the erotic context Thomas accentuates Jesus' masculinity, which the Western tradition never dared to do. Cf. Richard Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings*, Confessing the Faith in India Series, 11 (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), pp. 121-24.

should desire him (Isaiah 53:2), does not appear to have been inspirational for this painter.

Over against that, however, Thomas did depict the mystery of the incarnation in an impressive way. Nothing less than God's presence on earth is to be experienced in Jesus Christ. And this presence is characterized, in good Indian fashion, by mild compassion and exalted wisdom. The painter makes insouciant use of the different traditions the Indian religions have to offer. Christ stands like Krishna in the house of Mary and Martha: the neck bent sideways and the pelvis tilted, causing the body to take on the form of an s (*tribhanga*). At the transfiguration on the mount, Christ even has the blue body colour of the *avataras* of Vishnu. When he speaks with the Samaritan woman, the moon is so visible in the background that it seems as if the crescent moon is piercing his hair, as it does Shiva. And, as the painting reproduced here shows, the shape of Buddha is subservient to the message that Christ is the teacher, the guru, *par excellence*.

Thomas presented Jesus Christ in the Hindu culture in the same way as the thinkers and contemplatives in the ashram movement did. The consequence was obviously a strong emphasis on his divinity. But it is, after all, none other than "the eternal Christ" who has received a place here in a different environment, where he is just as much as home.

CHAPTER 9

Christ between the Religions

The Great Three: Panikkar, Thomas, Samartha

In the last quarter of the twentieth century three great names dominated Christian theology in India: Raimundo Panikkar, M.M. Thomas and S.J. Samartha. They were the leaders with respect to reflection on the relationship of the church to Hinduism. And it obtains for all three that reflection on the figure of Jesus Christ was central in this. Each of them wrote a book on Christ in connection with Hinduism as the first of many publications.

Panikkar, Thomas and Samartha had much in common in their open attitude towards the Hindu tradition and in their courage to reinterpret Christ in a radical way. But there were also great differences. Each of them represents one of the three great traditions in Christianity. Panikkar is Roman Catholic, Samartha was Protestant and Thomas belonged to the world of the Eastern Orthodox churches (albeit in the Reformist wing). But it was not only on this level that they were different from one another. Also, each had his own orientation in theology and church practice, which was not unrelated to their respective backgrounds and lives.

Raimundo Panikkar (1918-) grew up in a European environment in Spain. His father was from India but had worked for several years for a German chemical company in Barcelona and had married a Spanish woman. As could be expected, Pannikkar's father was Hindu and his mother Roman Catholic. He was initially raised in his mother's religious tradition, but gradually he began to explore increasingly the religious world from which his father came. Panikkar is very gifted intellectually. He studied chemistry, philosophy and theology, and obtained a doctorate in all three. But it was primarily in theology that he made his mark. Starting from a theology with a strongly mystical bent, he sought his whole life for a synthesis between the Christian faith and Hindu philosophy. Panikkar chose for the priesthood when he was a young man but did not feel drawn to

pastoral work: he was an academic. He became a full professor in Madrid when he was only 33 and subsequently taught at different universities elsewhere—in Rome, Harvard University and at Union Theological College. His last appointment was a professorship at the University of California in Santa Barbara.

M.M. Thomas (1916-1996)[1] was born in southern India, in the state of Kerala. His parents belonged to the Mar Thoma church which had separated from the ancient Syrian Orthodox church in Kerala in the nineteenth century. The latter church traced its history back to the preaching of the apostle Thomas in the first century. The Mar Thoma church arose as a result of a reform movement that was oriented towards British Protestantism. Just like Panikkar, Thomas first studied chemistry. He was self-taught as a theologian. As a young man, Thomas had been strongly influenced by Marxism. There had been a strong communist movement in Kerala since the beginning of the twentieth century. For Thomas, the questions of social justice and the necessity of revolutionary upheaval have always remained important. It is thus not surprising that he found his career in socially engaged Christian organizations. He first worked for the World Student Christian Federation, and then became director of the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society in Bangalore. He never held a church office but was chairperson of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches from 1968 to 1975. Lastly, he held a high government position from 1990 to 1992 as governor of the Indian state of Nagaland.

Stanley Jedidiah Samartha (1920-2002) came from the coastal area of the state of Karnataka. Here the pietistic Baseler Mission had been very active since the nineteenth century. His father was a minister in the church that emerged from this mission work and later merged into the Church of South India. Stanley followed in his father's footsteps, studied theology and

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[1] In line with the custom in some areas in southern India, Thomas had only one name, which was the name he was called by, his baptismal name and his "surname" at the same time. Two letters have been added. The first (Madathilparampil) indicates the origin of his family and the second (Mammen) is his father's name. His brothers and sisters have, of course, the same "initials." See his brother's website: M.M. Ninan, "Dr. M.M. Thomas, If you don't love, who will?" www.acns.com/~mm9n/mmt/mmt.htm (1997).

became a minister in the same denomination. Throughout his life he was very involved in the developments in the church in India. He was rector of the theological seminary of his church in Mangalore for several years and then professor at United Theological College in Bangalore. Samartha received his doctorate from Hartford Seminary (USA), writing his dissertation on the concept of history in Hinduism. Because of his academic interests and his church involvement, he dedicated himself to dialogue with Hindus. Like M.M. Thomas, he was given the opportunity to grow by the World Council of Churches: he was director of the World Council's sub-unit on Dialogue from 1971 to 1980.

The "Great Three" have received a great deal of recognition over the years, not only in India but also in Europe. That is apparent from, among other things, the honorary doctorates they received—each of them two: Panikkar from the University of the Baleares and from the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen; Thomas from Serampore College and from the University of Leiden; Samartha from Serampore College and the University of Utrecht. Their respective books on Christ at the start of their theological careers have played an important role. And it obtains for each of them that what is unique to each emerges in their Christological thinking: Panikkar as a mystical philosopher, Thomas as an inspired activist, Samartha as someone involved in the church.

Three Books on Christ: Panikkar

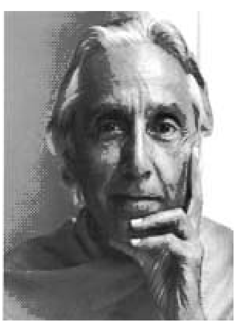
In 1961 Raimundo Panikkar received his doctorate in theology from the Lateran University in Rome. His dissertation was on the possibility of speaking about the presence of Christ within the Hindu tradition. The results of his study were published in England a few years later under the title *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism*. The book drew attention in general because of the radical way in which Christ was read into the sacred texts of Hinduism. The book was translated into German, Spanish, French and Italian. And an expanded edition whose argument was also more pointed was published in England and the United States in 1981.

It is still surprising that Panikkar could be granted a doctorate with this radical study at the papal university, and do so

summa cum laude at that. A few years later there would be much more openness for the form of truth in other religions because of the influence of the Second Vatican Council, but that was not the case in 1961. In the first edition of the book several thorny points were formulated more carefully than in the second edition of twenty years later. But it is also clear to the close reader in this first edition how far Panikkar wants to go in recognizing Hinduism as a revelation by God.

A charming anecdote gives a good example of this. In the second revised edition of 1981 Panikkar returns to what he wrote in the foreword of the first edition. In the latter he had stated that he had often been asked to write a book about Christ that Hindus could appreciate. His response at that time was that such a book did not have to be written because it already existed. Many people assumed he meant the Bible. In the new edition he returns to this comment, somewhat ashamed, and declares that he had never intended anything else by this already existing book than the *shruti*, i.e. the holy books of Hinduism, such as the vedas.

It is immediately clear what Pannikar wants to do in his book. He wants to show that Christ is already present in the classical Hindu tradition. He does not mean, of course, that the writers of the ancient wisdom books of Hinduism had formed a conception of Christ several centuries before his incarnation. But more can be said about Jesus than merely talking about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Panikkar wants to view Jesus on a different level: as the Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity. He is thus the only connection between God and the world. This is, therefore, not a historical level of thinking but an ontological one. If we speak about being itself, we can develop a total view in which Christ is central.



According to Pannikkar himself, the thesis of his book is simple, even if its elaboration is not. This thesis is: "Christianity and Hinduism meet each other in a reality which partakes of both the Divine and the Human, i.e. what Christians cannot but

call Christ."[2] From a Christian point of view, Christ is thus already present in Hinduism. In Panikkar's view, this is also a necessity. He gives two proofs for this, one positive and one negative. First of all, it must be said that Christ is the universal redeemer, a point to which justice is often not done when it is claimed that Hinduism has no place in his work.[3] It must also be said that Hinduism cannot be rejected as something outside of Christ. Should Hindus then believe that the loving God about whom Christians speak would be so cruel as to leave them in darkness?[4]

Panikkar has developed his own vocabulary for clarifying this central position of Christ. He resorts to the old word "theandrism" (god + human in one person), by which he meant the complete union of the divine and the human, as realized paradigmatically in Christ. If religions like Christianity and Hinduism are to encounter each other, it can only be there, in Christ. Religions need a concrete point of encounter like this: "'That theandric 'thing', the concrete connection between the Absolute and relative which all religions recognize in one way or another, we could call 'Lord', but we may also call it 'Christ'."[5] Panikkar later expanded this concept of theandrism to include the cosmos, which makes it even clearer that this is a mystical approach. It is a way of seeing in which the realities of God, humans and the universe slide into one another, a cosmotheandric intuition—to use Panikkar's famous term. The first initiatives for this are found in his book on Christ.[6]

Why should it be Christ precisely who becomes a symbol of universal encounter? Panikkar also poses this question and gives a less fundamental answer than would be expected. A Hindu symbol would also be possible: Rama, for example,

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[2] Raimundo Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, rev. ed. of 1981 (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 37.

[3] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, pp. 67-68.

[4] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 73.

[5] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, pp. 48-49.

[6] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 93.

could be a form that could be described in a similar function. But there is no generally accepted symbol in Hinduism like Christ in Christianity. Rama has central significance for only some Hindus and a "Ramalogy" would never have the same universal value that a Christology has.[7]

It thus concerns the question of how Christ can be recognized in classical Hinduism. Panikkar employs a surprising method here. He does not start from Hindu mythology or spirituality but from the philosophy of Hinduism. In a lengthy treatment, he gives his own Christological commentary on a fragment from the Brahma Sutra.[8] This collection of proverbs from the beginning of the Christian era, attributed to Badarayana, gives an overview in an extremely lapidary form of the great themes of the Hindu worldview. Throughout the centuries many thinkers from different schools have explained their philosophical systems by commenting on this original text. Every philosopher of any standing wrote his own commentary (*bhashya*) on the Brahma Sutra.

Raimundo Panikkar starts with the second (very short) proverb, which says: "Whence the origin etcetera of this" (*janmadyasya yatah*) (Brahma Sutra I.1.2). The "whence" refers to the Brahman, which is the subject of the first proverb. All thinkers are therefore agreed that the origin of everything is found in Brahman, the principle of the All. But there is disagreement as to how a changeable world can be brought into connection with the unchangeable, eternal Brahman.

For Panikkar, it is important that the philosophical tradition of India speaks of Brahman in two ways. On the one hand, Brahman is completely unknowable and immutable, transcending everything. On the other hand, Brahman can be described as "Ishvara," the Lord. The personal side of the divine All emerges in this more theistic approach, which is concerned with the turning of the divine to the world. However much it can also be said that Brahman is self-enclosed and inaccessible, Ishvara should always be mentioned in order to do justice to the supernatural origin of human beings and the cosmos.

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[7] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 38.

[8] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, pp. 97-162.

The word Brahman does not mean the same thing as "God" does in Christianity, but Panikkar is convinced that both concepts point to the same reality. They differ formally but are the same reality materially. It is thus possible for him, by means of the speculations about Brahman, to write a Christian reflection. Ishvara becomes central in his commentary on Brahma Sutra I.1.2. Apparently, God has two faces: one turned towards his own divinity, of which it is the most complete expression, and the other towards the world, in relationship with human beings and the cosmos. It can then be said: "the Ishvara of our interpretation points towards the Mystery of Christ."[9] And his final conclusion is even less reserved: "that from which this World comes forth and to which it returns and by which it is sustained, that is Ishvara, the Christ."[10]

Here Panikkar seems to have wandered far from the biblical approach to Christ as the man of God with a history among people, culminating in the cross and resurrection. But Panikkar thinks otherwise. He explains that the title of his book refers to how Paul found a point of contact in Athens with the religious world of his audience. Just as Paul explained to the Athenians on the Areopagus who was behind the "unknown God," so Panikkar reveals who the "unknown Christ" is in the context of Hinduism.[11] And not without good reason, he points in the final words of his book to the biblical text that, more than any other, describes a cosmic Christ: "He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17).[12]

Nevertheless, a critical remark can be made about the cosmic Christ who is presented to us as so separated from history. Christ has become another word here for an aspect of God, as a result of which the connection to Jesus of Nazareth has been completely cut. After all, it could have been Rama who symbolized the turning of God to the earth. But in Indian mythology Rama represents different values and forms of spirituality from those Jesus represents in the Bible. Pannikar himself continually

[9] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 160.

[10] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 162.

[11] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 168.

[12] Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ*, p. 169.

stresses that Christ is not exhausted in the historical Jesus—there is more to say about him. That is true, but Brinkman is correct when he writes: "if it is placed too emphatically in the foreground, it will inevitably lead to the trivialization of the importance of Jesus' own choices in life."[13]

Another hesitation in Panikkar's approach was articulated by Arnulf Camps at an early stage already. In his discussion of Panikkar and Klostermaier,[14] he wrote about the ontological way of thinking of both Roman Catholic theologians. He suspects that their Western origin has a great deal to do with it. He continues: "We wonder whether their theology will find much understanding from purely Indian Christian theologians."[15] That was completely to the point. Panikkar has become very well known outside of India because of his originality and scholarship, but in India there are others who managed to inspire more people in the Christian communities than he did. M.M. Thomas is an example of this.

Three Books on Christ: Thomas

When Panikkar's book on Christ was published in 1964, he was working at the Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society (C.I.S.R.S.) in Bangalore. The director of the institute at that time was M.M. Thomas. Thus, they knew each other well. But when Thomas started working two years later on his own book about Christ, there was no sign of any affinity with Pan-

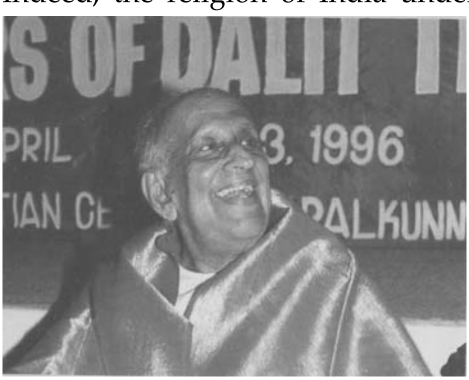
[13] Martien E. Brinkman, *The Non-Western Jesus: Jesus as Bodhisattva, Avatara, Guru, Prophet, Ancestor or Healer?* transl. Henry and Lucy Jansen, Cross Cultural Theologies (London: Equinox, 2008), forthcoming.

[14] In 1967 Klaus Klostermaier published a small Christological work that, just like Panikkar's book, linked up with Indian philosophical systems. Cf. Klaus K. Klostermaier, *Kristvidya: A Sketch of an Indian Christology*, Indian Christian Thought Series 8 (Bangalore: Christian Institute for the Study of Religion and Society, 1967). We will not discuss his work here because in the end it had much less influence than Panikkar's. For that matter, Klostermaier shows affinity with Hinduism as it is lived, which is much less so in Panikkar.

[15] A. Camps, "The Person and Function of Christ in Hinduism and in Hindu-Christian Theology," *Bulletin secretariatus pro non christianis* 6 (1971): 199-211.

ikkar's book. Thomas wrote his book while teaching as a guest lecturer at Union Theological Seminary in New York. It appeared in 1969 under the title *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance*. This title is, of course, a play on Panikkar's book, which had become famous in the meantime, and Thomas states this as well in his foreword.[16] But, apart from one further reference to Panikkar's book, Thomas follows his own path and does not engage in debate with Panikkar. The reason is that he viewed himself to be a scholar in another discipline. He opens his foreword very explicitly with the apologetic assurance that he was not a systematic theologian in any way. He simply wanted to provide unprocessed materials on which others could build their systems.[17] This modesty is somewhat exaggerated; in fact, Thomas builds a very consistent view with his historical material of the place of Christ in the development of modern Hinduism.

Thomas' intention in his whole theology is to make thinking about God an impetus for action. He is convinced that God can be found primarily where changes for the good occur in human society. Thus, it is certainly not a value-free history of Hinduism that Thomas is presenting in his book. Over against the traditional, more or less static Hinduism to which Panikkar addressed himself, Thomas looked at dynamics of Hinduism in its "renaissance" since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Indeed, the religion of India underwent a remarkable revival during the colonial period. For Thomas, it is especially important that in this renaissance the intransigent social ethics of Hinduism also began to change. Reflection on social justice could be observed in Hindu circles since Rammohan Roy, which in some cases subjected the socio-



[16] M.M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance* (London: SCM Press, 1969), p. X.

[17] Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. IX.

religious traditions of Hinduism—such as the caste system and the position of women—to heavy criticism.

Since Rammohan Roy published his miscellany from the gospels,[18] the great leaders of modern Hinduism have always looked at Jesus' sayings and his way of life. Values in the Gospel such as love of neighbour and non-violence have had great influence, but the relationship of Jesus to God has also become a topic in religious reflection in Hindu circles. Christ has thus received a fixed place in Hinduism. It is this Christ of modern Hinduism whom Thomas wants to describe. And here he is concerned primarily with what the confrontation with the Christ of the Gospel has brought about in the area of renewal and social change. God's acting in Christ is apparently not limited to the church and Christianity but can also be detected within Hinduism. Thomas borrowed this idea of Christ's work among the Hindus from Paul D. Devanandan (1901-1962), his predecessor at C.I.S.R.S. Devanandan had already been strongly interested in the more recent Hindu movements and had connected a clear Christological concept to them. A new humanity had been revealed in Christ. People outside the church as well shared in this new creation in Christ if they broke through traditional boundaries and thus responded to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God.

Therefore, like Panikkar, Thomas can speak about Christ in Hinduism, but it is a very different way of understanding the work of Christ. The difference between both interpretations has been summarized neatly as Panikkar's a priori Christology versus Thomas' a posteriori Christology.[19] In Panikkar, Christ is always present from the start in the Hindu philosophical systems in a suprahistorical way; in Thomas an active presence of Christ unfolds in the historical development of the religion.

Where does Thomas then see the clearest signs of Christ's work in India? He points to the great reformers—converts to the Christian faith or not—who gave Indian society a new face. First here is, of course, Raja Rammohan Roy, whom Thomas calls "the prophet of Indian nationalism." According to him, a

[18] See chapter 2 of this book.

[19] Heup Young Kim, "Towards a Christotao: Christ as the Theanthropocosmic Tao," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 10 (2000): 7.

first effect of the renewing spirit of Christ can already be observed in a revived Indian self-consciousness, to which Roy's strong commitment to social justice and renewal of Hinduism can be added. The Brahmo Samaj movement, which thus arose, has brought about intense discussions between Christians and Hindus. Thomas describes several things here, including the contribution by Nehemiah Goreh.[20] He then discusses three major figures in the Brahmo Samaj movement: Keshub Chunder Sen (1838-1884), P.C. Mozoomdar (1840-1905) and Brahmabhandav Upadhyaya (1861-1907). Swami Vivekananda occupies a very unique place because of his attempt to address the needs of the time—precisely those for which the Christians were demanding attention—from the perspective of the Advaita.[21] Thomas then discusses a modern Hindu thinker in the Advaita tradition, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), with his argument for a new humanity. During the years that Thomas was working on his book, Radhakrishnan was seen as the most influential Hindu leader; in addition he was then president of India. Finally, Thomas looked at the figure who would ultimately prove to have a more permanent influence: Mahatma Gandhi.[22] This is the climax of Thomas' historical sketch—for him, Gandhi is the one *par excellence* who, inspired by Christ, sought new paths for India.

Thomas is repeatedly looking for views that give meaning to history. In his view, it is only in history that God's revelation comes to light. When the thinkers of the Indian renaissance inspired people to see their life's task in that light, Thomas indicates the renewal he seeks. Thus, he appreciates Vivekananda for his protest against what the swami called "the Pharisees and Sadducees in Hinduism." And he praises his engagement "for man's dignity and for justice for men in society, and for historical action to realize it."[23] In contrast, the convert Brahmabandhav Upadhyaya falls short, because he never distanced himself from the caste system and thus did not appear to put God's

[20] For Goreh see chapter 3 of this volume.

[21] For Vivekananda see chapter 5 of this volume.

[22] For Gandhi see chapter 7 of this volume.

[23] Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, pp. 147-48.

will above everything.[24] One can therefore also understand why Thomas' account of Indian history ends with Mahatma Gandhi. Here he sees someone who gave everything in order to act, according to the example of Christ, in total devotion on behalf of the least in society. That does not mean that Thomas was uncritical of Gandhi. He does think that in Gandhi the person of Christ disappears too much behind the principles of his teachings. And Thomas does not feel any affinity for his rejection of the mission work of the church that Gandhi developed in connection with those teachings. Nonetheless, Thomas endorsed several points in Gandhi. The latter's *satyagraha* (sticking to the Truth), which was expressed in total dedication to non-violent resistance, is a Christian value. For Thomas, the Mahatma's words and deeds have a Christian meaning and constitute a challenge for the church in India. But something has also changed definitely for Hindus: through his example, Gandhi made clear what substitutionary suffering is. And Thomas concludes that, because of that, India can never return to the old teaching of karma.

The way in which M.M. Thomas presented Gandhi's life's work theologically to Christians in India has evoked much appreciation—and rightly so. It is a good example of what Thomas considered to be the task of theology: "the explication of the truth of the contemporary encounter between the Gospel and the situation."[25] And a very nice compliment about his theological work is that if Gandhi had become a Christian and had lived a quarter of a century longer, his theology would have looked like this.[26]

But Thomas' work did not only evoke admiration; he was also subjected to harsh criticism and vilification. His orientation to social action, whereby he even, very carefully, referred a few times to Marx, evoked much resistance in the right wing of Protestantism. When Thomas was chairperson of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, he was for some the

[24] Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 109.

[25] Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ*, p. 298.

[26] R.H.S. Boyd, *An Introduction to Indian Christian Theology*, 2nd rev. ed. (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), p. 331.

symbol of the politicization of church and theology, which was fiercely resisted. Thus the Methodist minister Sunand Sumithra defended a dissertation in Tübingen that concluded that, in the end, Thomas robbed God of his holiness, Jesus Christ of his lordship and the human being of his faith.[27] His supervisor was the missiologist Peter Beyerhaus, who had become known as the leader of the conservative pressure group Kein anderes Evangelium.

Twenty years later, such criticism, based not on analysis but only on complete polarization, evokes mainly astonishment. But there is a question to be posed concerning Thomas' work. It is undeniably correct to look for the ways in which the Gospel inspires people to renewal, also outside the Christian church. But pointing to the intention of God in historical movements here and there is also not without risk. What is the criterion for doing so? Here Thomas remains vague. In a later book he returned to this question and points to a document from the Assembly of the World Council in New Delhi in 1961. This document warned against the temptation of seeing the hand of God in certain historical movements that we personally support. Thomas' commentary here says a great deal: "But without some discernment of what is of God in the changing situation and what is not, how do Christians participate in historical action?"[28] That is, after all, the central issue for Thomas: that believers become active in their historical situation.

Three Books on Christ: Samartha

At the same time that M.M. Thomas was working on his book on the acknowledged Christ of the Indian renaissance, Stanley Samartha was busy with the same topic. His book, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ*, would not be published until

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[27] Sunand Sumithra, *Revolution as Revelation: A Study of M.M. Thomas's Theology*, Pro fide defendenda Series 1 (Tübingen/New Delhi: International Christian Network/Theological Research and Communications Institute, 1984), p. 317.

[28] M.M. Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake: Towards an Ecumenical Theology of Pluralism*, Indian edition (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1999), p. 111. Originally published in 1987.



1974, but it had been finished for several years already. A German translation was published in 1970. The basis for the book was a number of lectures Samartha had given some years earlier at United Theological College.[29] Just like Thomas, Samartha had been heavily influenced by Paul Devanandan. Samartha's interest was in what Devanandan called "the Christian concern in Hinduism."[30] Just like Thomas, Samartha describes a number of responses by prominent Hindu thinkers to the message of Christ. For him as well, the positive response by Hindus to Christ is an indication of God's involvement with people outside the Christian church.

Samartha's work does, however, have its own accent. More than Thomas, he is oriented towards church life. For Samartha, the questions of dialogue with Hinduism have everything to do with the relationship between Hindus and Christians in daily life in India and with the position of the small church communities in the midst of the dominant Hindu culture. Samartha's theologizing has a strong pastoral side as well. That is also apparent from the subjects he treats in his articles. Interreligious celebrations are important to them. He published the wedding sermon he preached at a mixed wedding service and wrote a funeral service in which both Christians and Hindus had a part.[31] One of his most important articles concerns dialogue in the context of the politicization of the religions in India.[32] It contains

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[29] Cf. Jan van Lin, "Christology and Christologies in India," *Exchange* XIV (1985): 6.

[30] S.J. Samartha, *The Hindu Response to the Unbound Christ* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1974), p. 6.

[31] S.J. Samartha, "On Love and Truth," *Current Dialogue* (1985) 8: 3-4; S.J. Samartha, "A Hindu-Christian Funeral," *Theology Today* XLIV (1988): 480-83.

[32] S.J. Samartha, "Dialogue and the Politicization of Religions in India," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 8 (1984): 104-07. The article was published in Dutch in a festschrift for D.C. Mulder, *Religies in*

a vehement protest against "communalism" as the fixation on the interests of one's own religious group is called in India. Through dialogue the different religious groups should learn to cooperate in a shared responsibility for society.

This tendency can also be found in Samartha's book on Christ. He begins his book by stating his conviction that "Christ has already made, and continues to make, an impact on the heart and mind of India."[33] The church must explore that point, in which case Christianity will not be in competition with Hinduism but in a position to cooperate. For the church does not possess Christ—that is Samartha's constant argument. Christ is "unbound" and thus universally accessible. In the modern period there are also Hindus who attached great value to this universality and accessibility of Christ. They have responded to the unbound Christ in their own way.

Samartha investigates these responses by means of a number of historical sketches. Again, Raja Rammohan Roy is discussed first. Samartha values him for his open attitude towards Christ and Christians, but he also points to the one-sidedness of his image of Christ. The Raja did familiarize himself with Jesus' moral teaching but did not gain much insight into his suffering and the question of sin and human suffering. Samartha then discusses in detail three thinkers from the Ramakrishna Mission: Shri Ramakrishna himself, then Swami Vivekananda and Swami Akhilananda.[34] For them, the mystical experience that Jesus Christ attained was first and foremost. Samartha did, of course, point out the one-sidedness here as well. They do not pay proper attention to the historicity and salvific meaning of the cross and resurrection. The theme of the unbound Christ emerges clearly only in Gandhi. Samartha emphasizes that, as a Hindu, Gandhi listened to Christ. For the Mahatma, it is not only Christians who truly believe in Christ and can explain his teaching well: "This seemed to him not only narrow and exclusive but also a denial of the universality of Jesus Christ and the

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nieuw perspectief (Kampen: Kok, 1985), pp. 18-28.

[33] Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, p. 1.

[34] See chapter 5 of this volume for a discussion of these three thinkers.

all-inclusiveness of his message of love."[35] Because of his orthodox Protestant background, Samartha did, of course, question the way in which Gandhi ignores topics like forgiveness and grace. But he returns repeatedly to the great significance that Gandhi attributed to the universal significance of Christ. And he appreciates the Mahatma primarily because of his contribution to respect for those of different faiths and cooperation between the religious groups in the population. That is also precisely what Samartha is looking for in the work of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, whom he, like M.M. Thomas, considers to the most important modern Hindu thinker. And Radhakrishnan is certainly inclined to ascribe great value to all religious traditions, including the Christian faith. He places Christ on a par with Krishna and the Buddha as divine teachers. But this typical Hindu tolerance, as Samartha is forced to note, entails the loss of Christ's uniqueness. Nonetheless, he remains impressed by the way in which, on the basis of the *advaita*, the monistic system, Radhakrishnan can give a place to Christ as a manifestation of God.

Samartha starts with this in his own Christology. He deliberately chooses the monistic tradition as the starting point for Indian theologizing.[36] In his view, the *advaita*—in particular in its purest form in Shankara's interpretation—is the most important school in Hinduism. For many modern Indians, this is the starting point for their religious outlook. It is precisely the *advaita*, adapted and reinterpreted, that is used by contemporary thinkers like Radhakrishnan to develop a view of modern society. And the serious and balanced attitude that Shankara expected from his students in their religious explorations is precisely the ideal attitude for dialogue in the current situation. In addition, Samartha was strongly affected by the monistic worldview, for it was a mystical worldview, in which God, humans and the cosmos can be surveyed in one whole. That also has consequences for the way in which the other faiths are viewed. Modern Hindus who engage in dialogue with others on the basis of the *advaita* do this therefore with an inclusive ap-

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[35] Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, p. 87.

[36] Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, pp. 162-67.

proach that Samartha finds especially appealing: "The all-inclusiveness of the advaita approach has a certain generosity and magnanimity which is reflected in the approach of neo-advaitins to other religions."[37] This attitude breaks through the hostility between the groups in the population, and that is precisely what Samartha has in mind.

Precisely by choosing the *advaita* as his starting point for Christology Samartha does not make it easy for himself. It is very important to him to underscore the historicity of Jesus Christ, and the monistic tradition does not pay much attention to history: the impermanence and transience of historical events do not belong, after all, to what is real but are shoved aside as *maya* (blinding, illusion). Samartha takes a great deal of trouble to show that the importance of history can certainly have a place in a modern interpretation of *advaita*. Here he makes grateful use of Radhakrishnan's expositions, who, as an *advaitin*, demanded that more attention be paid to history. Moreover, Samartha holds that the Christian faith can teach something to India precisely on this point. After all, if God's love is visible in the life of Jesus Christ and in his death and resurrection, then not only his life story but history in general receives a new meaning.[38]

What place does Christ receive in the context of a worldview that is determined by the *advaita*? Samartha does not want to describe Christ as an *avatara*, for *avataras* are, in his view, lower-class divine forms. For that matter, this is an argument that fits specifically in the monistic argumentation; someone in the *bhakti* range who is dedicated to Krishna certainly does not see this *avatara* as an inferior figure.[39] Samartha later offered a more nuanced view of the *avatara* concept. But initially he did not want to have anything to do with divine descents as a model for Christology. He wanted to do nothing less than connect Christ with the Brahman, the principle of the universe. Then ev-

[37] Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, p. 176.

[38] Samartha, *The Hindu Response*, p. 157.

[39] Thus correctly Eeuwout Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness: The Interreligious Dialogue and Theology of Religions in the Work of Stanley J. Samartha* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1992), p. 252.

erything comes together in Christ: the cosmos and life, human being and history. The *advaita*'s monistic view forces one to see precisely Christ as the all-encompassing. Samartha sees biblical points of contact for that in the notion that everything is created in Christ, as laid out in the gospel of John and the letters to the Colossians and the Hebrews. Christ appears to us in a highly exalted form, the greatest conceivable form. It is thus also not surprising that Samartha hails with approval the new image of "the cosmic Christ" that became popular around 1960. But he distances himself firmly from Panikkar who, in connection with the cosmic Christ, talked only about ontology and no more about historicity. For Samartha, it is always the earthly history of Jesus of Nazareth, with the cross and resurrection, that continues to determine the image. His Christology is thus also—in opposition to that of Panikkar—called a "cosmic Christology from below."[40]

Not everyone was convinced by Samartha's preference for the *advaita*. A noteworthy example was offered by the German translation of his book. The translator was Friso Melzer, a former missionary with the Baseler Mission.[41] He obviously felt little affinity for Samartha's work: in his foreword he writes that he did not agree with the book's argument but that the translation could in any case show that *advaita* did not offer any promise of a Christology.[42] That is very blunt. It does not do any justice to Samartha's sincere attempt to sketch a biblically grounded conception of Christ against the background of the popular Indian system of monistic philosophy. That his expositions were very abstract and are sometimes quite elaborate is another matter.

Further Developments

It began with three influential books on Christ in the context of Hindu culture, written in the 1960s. How did it progress fur-

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[40] Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness,* p. 256.

[41] On Melzer see D.J. Hoens, *Dr. Friso Melzer*, Farewell Lecture, Utrecht University, 1983.

[42] Melzer later argued that the *advaita* and the message of Christ were contradictory; cf. Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 36.

ther? Each of the three great thinkers continued with his own emphases. Several books followed.

Raimundo Panikkar, later called mainly by the English form of his name, Raimon, continued his study of Indian religious traditions. The classic Hindu writings were the first subject of his study, which resulted in a hefty (more than 900 pages) miscellany of the sacred texts of Hinduism. The title is suggestive: *The Vedic Experience*. He was not concerned so much with studying as he was with experiencing the religious wisdom of India. The texts could lend themselves, in particular, to "contemporary celebration," as the subtitle makes clear.[43] For that matter, the book discusses not only the Vedic writings in the narrow sense—the upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana yield a great many text fragments.

The next step in Panikkar's development is his orientation to Buddhism. He did indeed explore Buddhism already at the beginning of the 1960s and published a book about it. But it was not published until 1995, after different radical revisions, in the form that the author himself saw as exemplifying the point at which he ultimately had to arrive. The title was *El silencio del Buddha* (The Silence of the Buddha), with the very suggestive subtitle: *Una introducción al ateísmo religioso* (An Introduction to Religious Atheism).[44] Panikkar wants to erase the dividing line between believers and atheists by an approach in which one can no longer speak about God, an ontological apophatism.

It seems that he has become far removed from his book about Christ with which it all began. Nevertheless, that is only partly true. In the foreword to the second edition of that book, he also sees it as a merging together of four rivers: the Hindu, the Christian, the Buddhist and the secular traditions. With respect to content, one can remark that the concept of God in his book on the unknown Christ is already extremely thin. After all, everything that God means for people is present in Christ.

[43] Raimon Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience (Mantramañjarī): An Anthology of the Vedas for Modern Man and Contemporary Celebration* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2006); originally published in 1977.

[44] Raimon Panikkar, *El silencio del Buddha: Una introducción al ateísmo religioso* (Madrid: Ediciones Siruela,1996).

And if everything is said about the Son, there is then nothing to be said about the Father. When Christ then almost disappears from the stage in his later work, nothing more than a vague "somethingism" remains. The secularized Western individual finds it appealing perhaps, but it will not find any echo in the experience of the Indian, Hindu or Christian.

Although M.M. Thomas had no formal theological training, he developed into a broadly thinking ecumenical theologian. His central position at the World Council of Churches brought him into contact with very different theological approaches. Like the true Indian he was, he was constantly searching for a synthesis in the plurality of the contradictory and apparently mutually exclusive ideas.

In 1987 the World Council published a book of modest size in which Thomas took stock of many years of study and activity in interreligious dialogue. In the previous years Thomas had given guest lectures in the United States, including Princeton. That gave him the opportunity to systematize all the knowledge he had acquired in the previous period. The book is the result of that and is called *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake*. After all, Thomas had experienced that Christians are forced to put Christ at stake in the situation of dialogue. But they do that for the sake of Christ. The ultimate goal is "to reaffirm our confession of the ultimacy of Christ as the judge and redeemer of human rationality, community and other penultimate values—as well as of the religiosity of humankind."[45] Thomas is thus still concerned with the all-encompassing Christ who is active in the struggles of people.

But, what is new is that Thomas attaches much more value to the contribution of very divergent theological schools. He thus discusses extensively and with sympathy the theology of Panikkar as a typical example of Roman Catholic contribution to the debate. In addition, he presents the approach of his own teacher Devanandan as an example of where an authentic Protestant perspective leads. Thus, they each have their own value, the ontological reflection and the historically founded analysis. But can the two be connected? It is very remarkable that Thomas now sees a task here for the theologians of the Eastern Ortho-

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[45] Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake*, p. 7.

dox churches.[46] They always emphasized that in Christ God became united with the whole creation. The new life has already been realized in Christ—and his church—and the whole of humanity has, as it were, a place in that. Thus, Thomas has, in the end, come back to where he began—in the world of Eastern Orthodoxy.

Stanley Samartha has developed most clearly of the three with respect to his view of Christ. In his first book on Christ, he had advocated a clearly inclusive Christology, which was concerned with how Hindus responded to the universal "unbound" Christ. Apparently, Christianity could not claim Jesus Christ; his activity could be observed far beyond the boundaries of the church, among people of other religions. Samartha thus presented the concept of a cosmic Christ. He changed his mind on this position completely in later years. The repercussions of this turnaround can be found most clearly in his book *One Christ - Many Religions* that appeared in 1991.

Samartha appears to have distanced himself from every form of exclusivistic thinking by which the Christian church can proclaim the truth to those of other faiths. The experiences with dialogue in the years that he worked at the World Council of Churches brought him to this view. Everything that still tended towards a truth claim was forcefully shoved aside as a colonial leftover. But in his new views there was also an involvement in society in India that over time seemed more and more to be divided along lines of religious identity. Samartha is convinced that India precisely needs a special kind of Christology, in which first of all a sense of the Mystery is present: "Mystery provides the ontological basis for tolerance."[47] And an exclusive attitude with respect to "ultimate matters" must be rejected entirely.

The Christology that thus arises is a theocentric Christology. Samartha continues to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, but it is the connection with God that is primary. This

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[46] Thomas, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake*, pp. 116-18.

[47] S.J. Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology*, Faith Meets Faith Series, 3rd ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995); originally published in 1991.

connection can also be shared with those of other faiths. For Christians, Jesus Christ remains normative, but one can no longer speak of universal normativity. Others have their own divine figures, Rama or Krishna, and their ways of salvation. There can now be many *avataras* existing alongside one another. In his view, it is only in that way that an open dialogical attitude between people of different religions can be attained—and that is what it is finally all about!

Samartha uses a nice image to clarify what it is that drives him. He distinguishes between two kinds of Christology, which he compares with a helicopter and an bullock-cart, respectively. Christian missions always presented a Christology that landed on Asian soil like a helicopter with a great deal of noise and raised so much theological dust that the hearing and sight of those standing around was blocked. But the Christology of the bullock-cart type moves steadily forward at a slow pace, with the wheels firmly on the unpaved roads of Asia.[48]

The image is appealing, and the Christology that Samartha sketches in broad lines is appealing as well. He places the emphasis on Jesus Christ's willingness to serve and his solidarity with the suffering. Christians can learn a great deal from that and, in any case, they will be cured of their church triumphalism. The feeling for the divine mystery is also a valuable point, certainly in the Indian context. But much is lost as well. Nothing more is said about reconciliation and justification, and it remains unclear as to what significance the cross and resurrection—so important in Samartha's earlier work—can now have.

The question remains as to what Christians have to offer in interreligious dialogue with such a non-normative Christology. This is all the more so since the partners in the dialogue want to win the Christians over to their norms! Eeuwout Klootwijk concludes in a critical discussion of this development by Samartha: "Perhaps christology should be more inclusive and less relativized than Samartha's."[49] It remains remarkable that in his earlier work Samartha defended such an inclusive Christology with so much authority. Whatever objections could be brought

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[48] Samartha, *One Christ – Many Religions*, pp. 115-16,

[49] Klootwijk, *Commitment and Openness*, p. 269.

against the theological mode of the "cosmic Christ, " in any case it meant a message that was relevant for all—Christians and non-Christians. The all too modest Christ of Samartha's later work, which from the start has no message for non-Christians, is quite thin in comparison.

Jyoti Sahi

All three of the theologians in the previous chapter attempt to come up with an image of Christ in the midst of other religions. Jyoti Sahi is an Indian artist who, more than anyone else, portrays Christ in this way in his art. He is the most famous Christian painter in India at this time. Many churches have been decorated or embellished by him. He is also the one who, more than others, has reflected on the role of art in the Indian church and has written significant books on this topic.[1]

From his youth on, Jyoti Sahi was confronted with the differences concerning culture and religion. His father was an Indian whose family belonged to the Radhasvami Satsang, a Reformist movement in northern India. His mother was British with a Protestant Christian background. But she was also strongly interested in Eastern philosophy, with which she had become acquainted particularly in the circles around Krishnamurti. Jyoti was born in 1944 in Pune, where both his parents were teachers. He was baptized in the Scottish Presbyterian Church and received a Christian education. Interest in Hinduism and the Indian religious culture was also imparted to him as a child. The contacts with artists in his parental home convinced Jyoti at a young age that his life's task lay in the practice of art. After high school, he went to England when he was fifteen to be educated at the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in London. During this time he became interested in monastic life, particularly in an Indian setting. Meetings with Bede Griffiths, who was in England temporarily, put him on the track of the ashram movement.[2] Back in India he moved into the Kurishumala ashram in Kerala. He acquainted himself with the spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy and was also involved in the development of a new, more Indian style of church building.

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[1] In particular: Jyoti Sahi, *Stepping Stones: Reflections on the Theology of Indian Christian Culture* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 1986).

[2] On the ashram movement and Bede Griffiths see chapter 8 of this book.

Jyoti never became a true monk. In 1970 he married Jane, an English woman from a Quaker family. The marriage ceremony was conducted in the chapel of the Shantivanam ashram by Bede Griffiths. Jyoti and Jane settled in Siluvepura, a small Christian village close to Bangalore. He went to work for the Roman Catholic National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre in Bangalore, where he became intensely preoccupied with the issues of inculturation. Jyoti and Jane established a school in the village, open to children of all castes. From the very beginning their house was also an open meeting place for those engaged in interreligious dialogue.[3] After a number of years, Jyoti and Jane extended their village activities by founding an art ashram where young artists could train themselves further within a community in art forms that translate the Gospel into Indian images. The centrum is called "The Indian School of Art for Peace" (INSCAPE) or the Lucas Ashram.

Throughout the years Jyoti Sahi has produced many works of art, particularly paintings and woodcuts, but he also works in batik, stained glass windows and designs for railings and liturgical furniture. He uses Indian forms to portray Christian themes but also attempts, above all, to penetrate the mind of the Hindu and Buddhist culture and thus master the religious experience underlying them. This is how actual encounter between religions occurs. The many mandalas with Christ motifs he painted in a certain period of his life are a good example. Focusing on Christ can apparently be seen as a form of meditative concentration in line with the Hindu model.

Christ is at the centre of the whole of the religious experiential world of humankind. This is the image of the eternal Christ that we encounter in the ashram movement. Although this is where the roots of Jyoti's spirituality lie, he has gone further, into a increasingly deep reflection on the links between the religions. And, just as a synthesis arises in the theological work of Panikkar, Thomas and Samartha, so also in Jyoti Sahi's art.

A very good example is his painting that has been reproduced here, *Living Water*. Christ is portrayed as the risen Lord

[3] My first contact with Jyoti and Jane Sahi was during an extensive visit to Siluvepura in October 1976.

in the midst of human religiosity. This work has a very special liturgical function. It is a so-called Lenten veil, or "hunger cloth," which has a central place in the church during Lent. During the Middle Ages, the custom arose in the period of fasting before Easter of covering the splendour of the main altar by a cloth. This cloth was officially called the *velum templi* but was commonly called a hunger cloth because it was associated with fasting. Initially the cloths were bare, but they became more and more richly decorated with depictions of biblical themes. The tradition of the hunger cloth fell into disuse already in the nineteenth century. But in 1976 the old custom was given new life in Germany. The Roman Catholic diaconal organization Misereor had a hunger cloth designed for a Lenten fund-raising appeal for the Third World. This was a cloth that demanded attention for the lives of people in other countries. Sahi painted the first modern hunger cloth.



A new hunger cloth would appear each year for Lent, designed by another artist from another country. First, only German Roman Catholic parishes participated, but soon other European countries adopted the custom, including the Netherlands. And congregations of other denominations seemed to be interested in this new liturgical form. In 1984 Jyoti Sahi was

asked to make a second hunger cloth.[4] It was this cloth he then created, called Living Water.

The risen Christ stands central, triumphant over death. He is surrounded by a number of scenes that give expression to the religious searching of people, sometimes linked with a biblical depiction. The biblical narratives are taken from the Lent lectionary for year A. Thus at the top left we see Lazarus rising from the grave (John 11); but the grave is a mausoleum in Indian Muslim style. A similar building usually contains the sarcophagus of an Islamic holy man and is therefore a place of pilgrimage and prayer. At the top right we see a typically Indian representation. On a mountain in the lotus position sits a bearded man, clearly a wise yogi who comes closer to God via meditation and devotion (with a musical instrument!). But Christians would also see Moses on the mountain in this scene, and thus it refers to the story of the transfiguration on the mountain (Matthew 17). Under the right hand of Christ we see a woman making the Hindu gesture of worship and respect (*anjali*) with her hands. She is painted within the contours of a tear and thus represents the emotional involvement of Jesus with people. The basic shape of the tear is like the *mandorla*, which often appears in Jyoti Sahi's work. On the right we see the Samaritan woman (John 4). She is standing under a tree that is considered to be sacred in the state Karnataka, which is where the painter lives: the laburnum or golden shower tree. Thus it is a sacred event when the woman becomes acquainted with the living water. The traditional well—the place in every village where the discrepancies of caste are most strongly felt—is close by, abandoned. On the left in the foreground we see a group of people coming out of the village huts toward Christ. The light falls on a blind man, who is, of course a reference to the healing of the blind man (John 9). The group of people represent the poor and lower castes who come to stand before Jesus. Finally, on the right in the foreground is a water pot, like those used in many Hindu rituals. There are branches with lotus blossoms in it, the symbol of the beauty of new life.

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[4] The cloth was released in Germany for Lent in 1984, but it was introduced in the Netherlands a few years later, for Lent in 1987.

The painter refers to religiosity in India in everything. But what strikes the observant person the most is the matter of the central positioning of the living water. At first glance it seems to be the usual European depiction, by which the water flows from the horizon to the observer and then branches off in the foreground into two rivers. Nothing is less true. The water comes from above, out of heaven! It flows through Christ to the earth, and then divides into three rivers that flow toward the back, toward the front and toward the front left, so that the entire earth is provided with water. The water even springs up in the pitcher of the Samaritan woman; this is "a spring of water welling up to eternal life," as Jesus explains to her (John 4:14). The background of this depiction is the Hindu myth about the origin of the holy river, the Ganges, which is viewed as a divine figure descending from heaven to earth. When the water of the Ganges was going to descend for the first time, it threatened to come down with such a destructive force that Shiva positioned himself under it to protect the earth. He caught the force of the water with his head and allowed it to flow calmly along his body to the earth. Christ is standing here in the centre as the one who protects the earth from deadly forces and allows humankind to share in the life-giving water.

Via this hunger cloth Jyoti Sahi has shown that Christ is to be linked with the religious experience of India and culture that has arisen out of it. Everything that is holy for the Indians has something to say about God who revealed himself through Christ to humankind. In this way Jyoti Sahi's work fits into the tradition of the Christian ashram movement and the great theologians of dialogue, although this does date his work somewhat. Since the 1980s other issues have been given priority in the churches in India. Attention has shifted from inculturation and interreligious dialogue to social issues: justice and liberation have become the new topics. In one of his latest books Jyoti Sahi indignantly observed that today monks and artists must justify themselves and prove that their contribution has relevance as well. He adds:

> The blind forces of prejudice and violence, which erupt when a sort of fundamentalist tunnel vision cuts out of sight all those wider concerns which characterise a truly human concern for the world in which we live, threaten justice and

> peace far more perilously than any lack of material resources.[5]

Although this comment does demonstrate some bias, Jyoti is certainly right in his plea to search for links with other cultural and religious traditions. This may have retreated to the background in India, but the rise of a multicultural society in the West has produced great interest in it.

Jyoti Sahi's work is therefore especially interesting for those who are involved in interreligious dialogue. Both of his hunger cloths made a particular impression on many in the European churches. And expositions of his work attract enthusiastic visitors in many places, including the Netherlands and Flanders. In 2004 there was an exposition of his work in the Studentenkerk (Student Church) in Nijmegen and in 2005 in the gallery of the Mennonite Church in Haarlem and in the Catholic University in Louvain. At the opening of the exposition in Haarlem I cited the following quote from an old article by Sahi:

> A foreign art cannot reveal to the Indian Christian what *he* is. The question is not, 'Was Christ ever in such a cultural environment? Was he dressed in such clothes? Did he move in such a landscape?' The purpose of a Christian art is to reveal to the worshipper the cultural environment in which *he* moves, the clothes *he* wears, the landscape *he* moves in, but all this in *Christo*. Christ is here, the Truth and Being of the worshipper.[6]

The image of this all-encompassing Christ remains relevant, and not only for Indian believers.

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[5] Jyoti Sahi, *Holy Ground:A New Approach to the Mission of the Church in India* (Auckland: Pace Publishing, 1998), p. 13.

[6] Jyoti Sahi in an article in: *Word and Worship*, 1972, cited by Richard W. Taylor, *Jesus in Indian Paintings*, Confessing the Faith in India Series, 11 (Madras: The Christian Literature Society, 1975), p. 144.

CHAPTER 10

Jesus as Liberator in the Theology of the *Dalits*

In recent centuries Christian theologians in India have sought a connection with the original religion of the country, Hinduism. Some have directed themselves toward the monistic philosophy of the Vedanta in the conviction that that was where the most elevated form of Hinduism was to be found. Others were convinced that the theistic *bhakti* devotion was more valuable because that was where such striking parallels with one's own Christian religion were to be found. But the missionary and theologian were always concerned with finding some connection to the pan-Indian Hindu tradition, which had its sources in the classical holy writings in Sanskrit.

But in addition to this Great Tradition, as cultural anthropologists call it, there is another Hinduism. It is called the Little Tradition of the religion of simple people who were not part of the high-minded and educated religious culture of the elite. The distinction between the Great Tradition and the Little Tradition is applicable in many cultural areas, but in Hindu India it certainly concerns a quite large and meaningful difference. The Great Tradition is the religion of those who can boast of a certain religious purity on the basis of birth in a certain caste. They posses the exclusive right to the rituals and the knowledge that is laid down in the sacred texts in Sanskrit. The countless people of lower birth were excluded of old and had no part in the practice of this religion. This did not mean that they had no religion. They worshipped the great Hindu gods or other local divine figures in their own way. They had their own temples, their own rituals with their own priests and, in part, their own mythology. Instead of holy Sanskrit they used the language of their area to express religious knowledge. Thus the Little Tradition does not concern only one religious complex that can be found universally in the same form. Rather, it concerns a great variety of religious elements, varying strongly in each area, caste or tribe.

It is therefore also understandable that the Christian theologians paid no attention to this Little Tradition of Hinduism. In these circles there are no generally accepted sacred texts, no impressive buildings, and scarcely any reflective thinking has developed. And, above all, this form of religion is different in every part of the country. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that so little attention has been paid to this form of Hinduism, since the great majority of the Christian Indians belong there according to their social background! But here the strict hierarchal thinking that controls the Hindu culture takes its revenge. What Hinduism is is determined by the highest priestly groups in society. On the whole, the people at the bottom of society do not count —not in socio-economic terms nor in cultural-religious terms. The irrefutable caste system determines the view of the whole of society.

In Hindu culture, birth is determinative for one's life. Every person is born into a certain caste (*jati*). Every region contains a variety of castes, and across the entire country the castes number in total at least in the hundreds, although the exact number is disputable: whether similar castes in the one region are actually the same as in another region is difficult to determine. The basic idea of caste is hierarchy. It is not for nothing that the classic study on the Indian caste system is called *homo hierarchicus*.[1] The basis of this hierarchy is religious purity. The members of the higher castes would, through birth, possess a larger degree of purity that enables them to manage the sacred from a position closer by. Certain occupations belong to certain castes, and it is no wonder that the priesthood was linked of old to the highest caste, i.e. the brahman caste. The oldest sacred text of Hinduism, the Rig Veda, already points to a ritual hierarchy among people in a system of four classes (*varna*). It is this religious theory that has held sway over the differences among people for at least three millennia.

The four classes are arranged in decreasing degree of purity: brahman (priest), *kshatriya* (warriors and governors), *vaishya* (traders and farmers) and *shudra* (servants and labourers).

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[1] Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1980); original French edition published in 1966.

Those in the first three of these four classes are called "reborn" (*dvija*) because they were allowed to undergo—like a second birth—a religious initiation that gives them the right to carry out sacrificial acts. The fourth class, that of the *shudra*, is much lower ritually, because for those who are members of that class such an initiation is not possible. Even much lower in the hierarchy are those who because of their caste background cannot even claim a position within the system of the four classes. They are *a-varna*, i.e. they do not belong within the four classes, and because of this their position on the ladder of purity is completely at the bottom. In the eyes of orthodox Hindus, they are extremely unclean, so much so that even contact with them will pollute "reborn" Hindus. This lowest layer of society consists of the original population that the Aryans encountered in their invasion of the Indian subcontinent. They are usually called the "untouchables" and in recent decades have been calling themselves *dalit*.

The original meaning of the Sanskrit word *dalit* is "broken"; it is therefore also a designation for people who are oppressed. One of the leaders of the untouchables in the nineteenth century, Mahatma Phule, used the word for the first time to refer to the perilous position of his people. Not until the 1970s did it come into use as a sobriquet assumed by the untouchables in a new and militant self-awareness . Since then *dalits* has become the general name for people in those castes who are excluded from the system of religious purity as used by the traditional Hindus. The number of *dalits* in India at this time is more than 150 million (about 15% of the population). Even in the India of today they live in a oppressed situation. *Dalits* always live in a separate district in the villages. They carry out the lowliest manual labour, among which serfdom is not uncommon. Although many earlier restrictions are now forbidden by law, they are often banned from using the village well, they have limited access to schools, temples and government institutions. *Dalits* are often the victim of public violence: maltreatment and rape by high-caste Hindus frequently occurs.

Thus the *dalits* occupy a very subservient position but they are part of the socio-economic structure. Since ancient times they have had a fixed, essential position. Jobs that in the eyes of the high-caste Hindus are very unclean were always assigned

to them: handling dead people and animals, cleaning toilets, sweeping the streets, working leather, etc. Traditional village life would be turned completely upside down if the *dalits* refuse to do their work.

There are also groups low on the scale that have their place outside of the usual socio-economic structure. These are the people who live remotely in inaccessible areas in tribes. From the perspective of the caste system, they have a position that is similar to *dalits*. In their own circles they form more or less autonomous societies that have little social differentiation. Their untouchability is less noticeable that way: they do not come into contact with the usual caste society. The members of such tribes have chosen their own name, reflecting self-awareness. They call themselves the *adivasi*, i.e, original inhabitants of this land.

Throughout the centuries the Christian mission has been able to reach the *dalits* in particular—and the *adivasis* to a lesser degree. That is due to two reasons. First, there is the socio-economic reason: the *dalits* can expect, or at least assume, that they will move up when they convert to the Christian faith—to move down any lower than where they were is in any case impossible. But there was also a reason relating to content of the proclamation for the attraction of Christian preaching. The attention paid to the least in the Gospel is what attracted the *dalits*, although the preaching rarely applied the Gospel to the social reality in which they lived.

For that matter, should the *dalits* have thought they would be able to retreat completely from the caste system by converting, they were deceived. The hierarchal thinking in categories of inherited purity is so deeply anchored in Indian society that it has also determined church life to a larger degree. *Dalits* were addressed as people who were permitted to join the church, and that undoubtedly did them good. But they were usually permitted to belong to the ecclesiastical communities only as untouchables. It was very important for the missionaries of various confessions not to endanger the contacts with the influential brahmans in particular. Within the church as well the believers who were of brahman descent carried much more weight than those of low caste. Thus, there were divisions among groups of Christians on the basis of the Hindu rules of purity.

In certain periods the Roman Catholic mission went the furthest in this. One of the first preachers in India, Roberto de Nobili, only attempted the conversion of the brahmans and refused all contact with those of the lower castes. Other missionaries worked alongside him among the non-brahmanic castes in the *shudra* class and there was also the separate mission for the untouchables.[2] In some parts of India this segregation into three parish categories was maintained until far into the twentieth century. In Kerala Roman Catholic priests who worked among the *shudras* was not even permitted to enter a Roman Catholic church for those of the high caste![3] Although the Protestant missionaries were far more inclined to challenge the caste way of thinking, they often succumbed to the pressure of the high castes, within and outside the church. Pandita Ramabai noticed in the church of Madras that the preachers used different cups in the same Holy Communion service for the church members of different Hindu backgrounds.[4] And there are stories of discrimination against *dalits* in earlier times from all regions: they had to sit in a separate enclosed part of the church, bury their dead in a separate cemetery, were not permitted to fill the function of reader or acolyte, and so on.[5] And examples of such discrimination can still be found today. For that matter, the Christian *dalits* have an extra problem in current society. The Indian government has an active policy of positive discrimination for the benefit of underdeveloped groups, who are registered for that purpose as "Scheduled Castes and Tribes." The Hindu and Buddhist *dalits* are included, but not the Christian *dalits*. They

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[2] V. Devasahayam, "The Norms of Dalit Theology," in: V. Devasahayam (ed.), *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Delhi/Madras: I.S.P.C.K./Gurukul, 1997), pp. 45-46. He makes a good comparison of this with the three tents in the Gospel story of the Transfiguration on the mountain.

[3] Charlie Pye-Smith, *Rebels and Outcasts: A Journey Through Christian India* (Harmondsworth: Viking, 1997), p. 139

[4] Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1888), p. 6.

[5] See e.g. Jebamalai Raja, "The Problem of Caste within the Church," *Journal of Dharma* XXIV (1999): 28-39.

are seen as receiving enough support from their religious community. Unfortunately, that is usually not the case.

In general, the *dalits* were marginalized in the Christian church. Little attention was paid to their poor position in society and others did not see their cultural-religious background. Dialogue with Hinduism was still always dialogue with the brahmans and their Great Tradition. Inculturation always meant the translation of the Christian faith with the aid of the concepts and rituals from the holy literature in Sanskrit. It did not appear to dawn on more than a very few that almost three quarters of Indian Christians did not descend from the population who followed that religion. But a change was signalled around 1980, and one may now speak of a reversal in the attitude with regard to *dalits* in the Indian churches.

The first sign of a changed understanding was the address that Arvind P. Nirmal (1936-1995) gave in 1981 at the United Theological College in Bangalore. The remarkable title of this speech was "Towards a Shudra Theology."[6] Nirmal asked that attention be paid to the renewed self-consciousness among the people of the lower castes and he saw it as the task of Christian theology to pursue this. Although Nirmal himself came from a *dalit* caste, he was not concerned primarily with the untouchables. He wanted to break through the monopoly of the brahman-oriented thought in the churches—thus the term "shudra theology." Similarly, the Jesuit Lancy Lobo argued that the clergy should become acquainted with the "non-Sanskritic" tradition.[7] Here, too, it involved resistance against the dominant influence of the brahman thinking.

The names cited above immediately give an indication as to the orientation of *dalit* theology. Theological training played a major role in the southern states as far as the Protestants were

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[6] See Jesudas M. Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," http://jmathyal.tripod.com/. A revised version of Nirmal's famous lecture appeared later with the title: "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in: Arvind P. Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras Gurukul Lutheran Theological Institute and Research Institute, n.y), pp. 53-70. The changing of the title is typical!

[7] Lancy Lobo, "Towards an Inculturation in the Non-Sanskritic Tradition," *Vidyajyoti* 49 (1985): 16-28.

concerned. There was, in the first place, United Theological College in Bangalore, but there was also the Gurukul Lutheran Theological College in Madras, where Nirmal was permitted to set up a separate department for *dalit* theology.[8] In Roman Catholic circles it is especially the Jesuits who are leading the way in drafting a *dalit* theology.[9] In recent years, a new ecumenical structure of *dalit* theology was achieved with the Centre of Dalit Studies (Theology), which opened in New Delhi in 2001 under the supervision of James Massey.

It was not for nothing that this separate dalit theology arose in the 1980s. In the previous decade in India, particularly in the state of Maharashtra, a broad *dalit* emancipation movement arose. For the first time literature from the *dalits* was published, attracting a great deal of attention.[10] And more radical *dalits* united in a militant protest movement with the threatening name of Dalit Panthers. The central theme in much of Christian theology in that period, i.e. the 1970s, was "liberation." The "black theology" that had arisen somewhat earlier had become popular among black theologians in North America and in Latin America many theologians had been captivated by liberation theology, linking up with a broader revolutionary revival. The Indian theologians devoted to the *dalits* fell back on this long-established liberation theology. The black theologian James Cone[11] was thus primarily quoted extensively in their works,

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[8] Among the theologians of the UTC who are researching *dalit* theology: M.E. Prabhakar, Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, S.K. Chatterji, John C.B. Webster and F.J. Balasundaram. At Gurukul in Madras V. Devasahayam and Jesudas M. Athyal should be mentioned.

[9] In addition to Lobo, there are also Anthony Raj, P. Arokiadoss, Jebamalai Raja, Sebastian Kappen, A. Maria Arul Raja and the economist M.R. Arulraja, who studied with the Jesuits.

[10] For example, Madhau Kondvilker, *Dagboek van een onaanraakbare* [Diary of an Untouchable] ('s-Hertogenbosch: Stichting Gezamenlijke Missiepubliciteit, 1986), a book written in Marathi, which was even translated from French into Dutch.

[11] M.E. Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. 415, 422; M.E. Prabhakar, "The Search for a Dalit Theology," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 47; William Madtha, "Dalit Theology," *Journal of Dharma* XVI (1991): 76; John

but a large number of Latin American revolutionaries of various disciplines are quoted as well, such as Gustavo Gutierrez, Paolo Freire, Leonardo Boff and Oscar Romero.[12] Where Latin American liberation theology and *dalit* theology are in agreement is the great significance attributed to the exodus motif. But there are differences as well: the caste issue is so specific that Indian theology is forced to go its own way.[13]

In line with American liberation theology, *dalit* theologians saw their work as a counter-movement. They reacted against the prevailing theological insights in their country and offered a revolutionary alternative, linking up with the struggle for liberation of the oppressed. Because of the *dalit* theologians, characterizations such as "counter-theology" (Nirmal), "counter ideology" (Devasahayam) or conflict model (Webster) were used. Thus, in the 1990s this theological movement was strongly experienced as being opposed to the interests of established ecclesiastical interests and traditional theological range of ideas. Now that *dalit* theologians are slowly gaining increasing recognition, also internationally, a shift is visible. Typical of this shift is Athyal's argument for a move from a "dialectic method" to a "more dialogical approach."[14] Moreover, in addition to the actual *dalit* theology, a separate type of theology has arisen in the tribal communities in recent years.[15] This *adivasi* theology is also a counter-movement but is less concerned with socio-polit-

C.B. Webster, "From Indian Church to Indian Theology," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, pp. 118-19; M. Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermenuetics," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 332.

[12] Madtha, "Dalit Theology," pp. 76 (Romero), 77 (Freire), 78-80 (Gutierrez), 85 (Boff); A.P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, p. 141 (Boff); Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 412 (Boff); Gnanavaram, "Some Reflections on Dalit Hermeneutics," pp. 329 (Boff) and 330 (Gutierrez); Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," p. 8/26 (Gutierrez).

[13] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 56.

[14] Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," p. 13/26.

[15] Dieter Hecker, "Adivasi-Theologie," *Gossner Mission Information* (2003): 4.

ical issues than it is with the issues of the relationship between humans and nature and the preservation of creation.

One fixed point in *dalit* theology is the major role given to biblical reflection.[16] A balance between Scripture and tradition as a source of knowledge of revelation was, of course, not to be expected. *Dalits* appeal to the Bible in a succinct protest against traditional representations in church and theology. By reading the Scriptures from the perspective of one's own experience with oppression, the good message would acquire a shape in a new way. For all *dalit* theologians, the figure of Jesus Christ is central. A number of aspects can be distinguished in this new understanding of Christ.

Faith in Jesus Liberates

The starting point of all *dalit* theology is that faith in Jesus Christ has liberating power. In connection with this, particular attention is paid to the position of *dalits* in society and the circumstances that were placed on their shoulders as a yoke during so many centuries. Prabhakar formulates this in a way that every *dalit* theologian would approve: "For the Indian Christian Dalits, to know Jesus Christ is to realise that the God of Jesus Christ will save them from inhumanity, social oppression, economic exploitation and cultural subjugation."[17] Belief in Christ is directly linked here to the battle for an improved existence for the oppressed in society. In Indian relationships, this is a new point of view, as can be demonstrated by a glance back in history.

In the nineteenth century, when the untouchables were still called *pariah*, they came into contact with Christian preachers. It was unusual in the circumstances at the time that there would be a message at all for the *pariahs*. A message of salvation was addressed to people who felt completely excluded. In addition, there was practical help in the form of education and medical care, provided by the missionaries. Large numbers of *pariah*

[16] M.R. Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit: Liberation Theology by Victims of Untouchability. An Indian Version of Apartheid* (Ameerpet: published by the author, 1996), p. 57.

[17] Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 409.

communities converted en masse to Christianity. It was clear that not much would change in their position in relation to the high-caste Hindus. But it was already progress to be allowed within the Christian church. In the twentieth century, the *pariah* gradually became *harijan*. This term, which means "the child of God," was given to the untouchables by Mahatma Gandhi. Apparently, they were allowed to take a legitimate place within the Hindu caste society as well. Gandhi applied himself to changing the mentality of the high-caste Hindus, by which the situation of the untouchables would slowly improve. Ecclesiastical leaders adopted his ideas: Christian untouchables should also gradually receive more recognition from other church members. But when it proved that this change was occurring much slower than expected, the *harijan* became a *dalit*. Since the 1970s an awareness has been growing among the untouchables that they can obtain a legitimate position in society only if they take it. This required a different theology, and a different conception of Jesus Christ. In nineteenth-century missions, the redemption of the sinner was central, by which salvation was to be expected after the earthly life: Christ was primarily a redeemer for later. In the twentieth century the church in India paid much more attention to social circumstances. Lending help and care stood high on the list. Christ was the one who was there for all people and linked them to one another. Now, in the present *dalit* movement, the central issue is restoring rights that have been violated for centuries. Christ chose a side: he has become the ally of the oppressed.

These new insights found their way into the liturgy and preaching of the ecclesial communities. New liturgical texts were written that were intended to appeal to the *dalits* in particular during the gathering of the community. Thus a prayer, based on the Lord's prayer, reads as follows:

> Our God, who is near to and far away from us, glorified be your name in our everyday living. Your plans be executed in all our struggles as they were carried out in the exodus-event. Help us satisfy this day all our needs. Forgive us our being passive and indifferent members of this unjust social order. Allow us not into bondage of any sort, but set us free

> from the state of being oppressed and exploited. For yours is the universe, all our lives, struggles and services. Amen.[18]

And a new liturgy for the celebration of the Lord's Supper describes how Christ is active in the sacrament in the following way:

> The broken bread, the broken body of Jesus, draws us towards the rejected, the hurt and the poor. In them, and through them too, our hearts are fed, often in a painful way. Let us also share in the pain of our crucified Savior and Lord.[19]

If, according to the old adage, the religious doctrine can be deduced from the contents of the prayer (*lex orandi lex credendi*), then these liturgical texts from the *dalit* circle are good witnesses to *dalit* theology.

Jesus is a Dalit

Why do *dalits* experience faith in Jesus Christ as liberating? One of their answers to this question would be: because he can be characterized as a *dalit*. *Dalit* theologians stress that in Jesus Christ God is connected in a special way with the oppressed, and therefore with the *dalits*. This is expressed very succinctly in the position that some *dalit* theologians take—that Jesus himself was a *dalit*.

The identification of one's own life with Jesus' goes unusually far here. It is not enough for *dalit* theologians to present an analogy along the following lines: just as Jesus sought out the poor in his day, so his message comes to the *dalits* today as well. But they explicitly put Jesus historically on the same level as *dalits*. Thus, some *dalit* theologians fall back on Jesus' genealogy, with which Matthew begins his gospel.[20] As is well known, in the long series of names of Jewish ancestors, there are also

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[18] Text from Paul S. Elisa, in: John C.B. Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, ISPCK Contextual Theological Education Series 8 (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1995), p. 123.

[19] Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, p. 121.

[20] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," pp. 65-66; Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 415.

four names of non-Jewish women included: Tamar, Rachab, Ruth and "the wife of Uriah" (Bathsheba). *Dalit* theologians deduce from this that Jesus did not have a purely Jewish lineage. And being of "mixed caste" is one of the characteristics of the *dalits* (Prabhakar). The stories about licentious sexual behaviour that are linked to all these women add to the suggestion that Jesus' lineage bears *dalit* characteristics (Nirmal). Jesus can thus be reproached, just as *dalits* regularly are, for the fact that his ancestors did not observe regulations for purity. One may certainly doubt whether this is what Matthew intended with the prologue to his gospel.

It is not only the opening of the gospel according to Matthew that is used here as evidence. The birth of Jesus, as described by Luke at the beginning of his gospel, is also very significant for *dalit* theologians. Research shows that Christmas sermons on Luke 2 by *dalit* preachers have the tendency to make a clear link between Jesus' origins and the *dalits* of today.[21] Jesus' parents were poor wanderers and it is typical that their child was born in a filthy stall. The first witnesses to the birth were simple shepherds, and the child subsequently grew up in the "backward area" of Galilea (a typical term in connection with the social circumstances of *dalits*). From these few examples it becomes clear that the preachers were apparently searching for elements that would make Jesus a *dalit*. Jesus' descent from King David and the heavenly message that the birth would would bring joy to "all the people" is not cited. Webster comments ironically that if Jesus had been born rich, as Gautama Buddha was, it would have been bad news.

The first and most famous *dalit* theologian, Arvind Nirmal, goes farthest in identifying Jesus with the *dalits*. To him the meaning of the incarnation becomes clear only in the fact of Jesus' being a *dalit*: "His dalitness is the key to the mystery of his divine human unity."[22] Nirmal is thinking in particular of the way in which the Son of Man, along his path of suffering, becomes the victim of rejection, ridicule and scorn. Because the suffering and death are done to him by the established religious

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[21] Webster analysed a number of sermons from the *dalit* perspective; see: Webster, *The Pastor to Dalits*, i.e. pp. 64-66.

[22] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 65.

power, Christ becomes, on his path of suffering, the "prototype of all dalits."[23]

Thus the symbol of Jesus' being *dalit* is the cross. This is how Nirmal articulated it in his pioneering explanation of "shudra theology" and it is that idea that we often encounter in the writings of *dalit* theologians.[24] It is indeed a principal idea of Christian faith: the God of the people does not shun suffering. And it is very understandable that Christ, as the suffering one, appeals precisely to this population group which has had traumatic experiences of oppression, accumulated over centuries of injustice. In this way, God comes very close to the people, especially the *dalit*. Incidentally, for most *dalit* theologians, the meaning of the suffering of Christ seems to be the most profound here. Traditional ideas as to the effect of Christ's crucifixion has brought about have little meaning in this theology.

Jesus Proclaims Liberation

According to *dalit* theologians, the source of the effect that Jesus has on people is his own words. It is a message of liberation that is directed especially toward the poor and oppressed. Usually the most important example that *dalit* theologians grasp is the account of Jesus' first appearance in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:14-30). Using a fashionable term, they refer to what Jesus says here as "the Nazareth Manifesto."[25] It all centres on the text from the book of Isaiah, which Jesus reads in the synagogue and proceeds to apply it to himself. Those prophetic words speak of the Spirit that rests on him and the charge entrusted to him by the Spirit. The charge opens with the words:

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[23] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," pp. 66-67.

[24] E.g. Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," pp. 414-16; V. Devasahayam in a Biblical study on "The Cross as Countering the Caste Consciousness," in: V. Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. 53-67; Madtha, "Dalit Theology," p. 83.

[25] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 67; Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," pp. 414-15; D. Monikaraj, "Mission, Evangelism and Conversion," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 463; cf. Abraham P. Athyal, "Liberative Insights into the New Testament," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, pp. 321-25.

"to preach good news to the poor" and continues somewhat later with "to release the oppressed." Understandably and correctly, *dalit* theologians have attached a particular meaning to these words. The message of Jesus encompasses good news for the poor and oppressed. Applying this to today, the *dalits*, of course, come into view.

The importance of this part of the Bible for the *dalits* is illustrated in an article by the prominent *dalit* theologian James Massey.[26] The article begins with the aforementioned text on the oppressed who receive freedom, but this text is cited in Hindi: "Daliton ko swatantrata pradan karun." The author does so, of course, so that the emphasis falls on the word *dalit*. In this way the charge that Jesus takes upon himself is connected even more closely to the *dalits* that Massey wishes to serve with his theology. In the Hindi translation of the Bible the Greek word for "oppressed" (*tethrausmenoi*) is translated by *dalit*. But there is another explanation for linking these prophetic texts with the lot of contemporary *dalits* in India: they are, after all, not only oppressed but also poor. The word "poor" at the beginning of the quotation from Isaiah could also refer to the *dalits*. William Madtha, strongly influenced by Latin American liberation theology, does just that when he writes: "Dalits are the anawim: the alienated, marginated, wretched of the earth."[27] By using the Hebrew word *anawim*, the entire Old Testament background on doing justice to the poor resounds. It is very convincing when Jesus' preaching is placed within the entirety of the biblical message. For that matter, not all *dalit* theologians are as strongly inclined to draw on the Old Testament in their theology.

There is no doubt that Jesus' message is intended for *dalits*. But is that all Jesus wants to say? For some *dalit* theologians, this is indeed the case. The radical Nirmal in particular writes straightforwardly that the liberation of which Jesus speaks is intended for *dalits* and not for non-*dalits*.[28] Like James Cone's

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[26] James Massey, "Ingredients for a Dalit Theology," in: Nirmal, *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, pp. 145-50.

[27] Madtha, "Dalit Theology," p. 74.

[28] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 67. Cf. Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," pp. 414-15.

"black theology" in relation to non-blacks, the only possibility this approach offers to non-*dalits* is that the liberation of the oppressed makes it impossible for the non-*dalits* to continue to oppress them. The radical *dalit* theologians have not always made themselves popular.

But their most important achievement has been the general acceptance of the position that the proclamation of Jesus Christ has to do with the concrete conditions in which people live. And if that proclamation is about liberation, then the problems of the *dalits*, of course, come into view. In this respect, the *dalit* theologians are concerned primarily with the liberation from injustice in the socio-economic area. The exploitation and oppression that the *dalits* have experienced have given occasion for searching for the words in the Gospel especially in which Jesus turns against injustice. But the *dalit* theologians are also concerned with liberation from the wrong forms of religion. The story about the cleansing of the temple is particularly appealing.[29] For *dalits*, whose ancestors were never permitted in the high-caste Hindu temples, the image of Jesus taking a whip to restore order in the temple is naturally an attractive picture.

Jesus Opposes Untouchability

Over against the temple tradition of the high-caste Hindus, the *dalits* had always held their own religion in honour. It was a religious subculture with its own holy places, its own rituals and, for the most part, its own gods. For the *dalits*, this religious-cultural uniqueness was also very important socially. In normal life, especially with regard to labour, they were continually confronted with their untouchability. They did not participate in life in the village proper where the high-caste Hindus lived, and they certainly did not participate in the world of the sacred, which the brahmans anxiously guarded. But this untouchability was not felt in their own circles. Here the *dalits* were among *dalits* and they could experience rituals in their own way without any restrictions. It is understandable that, for the most part, these rituals were of a communal nature. The togetherness was

[29] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," pp. 68-69; Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, pp. 82-84.

important in order to define themselves over against the dominant religious culture of the high-caste Hindus.

A fine example are the rituals of the *pulayas* in Kerala.[30] This is a very low caste that also displays tribal characteristics. They were seen as extraordinarily impure and treated as such by the members of the high castes. A *pulaya* had to move aside if a brahman approached and was not to come closer than twenty meters. Of course, the *pulayas* did not participate in the temple cult and other high-caste rituals in any way. But they had their own religious gatherings called *theyyam*. Drum music and dance played an important part in these celebrations, which lasted at least twenty-four hours. The *theyyam* was primarily a communally experienced ecstasy. The dancers would fall into a trance and the gods and spirits were thought to be present through them. The fast-paced music and lack of sleep enthralled the entire community and, as it were, raised it to a higher plane.

With this religious background, it is obvious that the communal rituals of the church have a special meaning for *dalits* who had become Christians. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is particularly important for them.[31] Here they experience the communality that they experienced earlier in their own religious subculture. And here is where the untouchability is broken through in a most penetrating way. After all, there is no stronger proof of ritual equality and mutual acknowledgement in Indian culture than in eating and drinking together.

If *dalits* form an image of Jesus Christ, then an important aspect of it will be his struggle against untouchability. Numerous stories in the Gospel have convinced the *dalits* that Jesus continually opposed the same purity laws used to discriminate against them. The communal meal is therefore the most striking symbol. *Dalit* theologians refer again and again to the meals in the Bible stories that Jesus shared with "tax collectors and sin-

[30] See J.J. Pallath, "Subaltern Christian Groups and the Crisis of Cultural Identity," *Journal of Dharma* XXIV (1991): 51-66.

[31] See also: George Soares-Prabhu, "The Table Fellowship of Jesus: Its Significance for Dalit Christians in India Today," *Jeevadhara* XXII (1992): 140-59.

ners."[32] And the final "Lord's Supper," as the first occurrence of the on-going celebration of bread and wine in the churches, is viewed as being of the same nature as these revolutionary meals.

Perhaps the *dalit* theologians have an even stronger point in two other aspects of Jesus' life and work that are favourites among them. It concerns the attitude of Jesus toward the lepers and his contact with the Samaritans. It is indeed striking in the gospels that Jesus consciously breaks the purity laws in dealing with lepers. The *dalits* see a great deal of themselves in the position of the lepers. After all, lepers were forced to live outside of the cities and villages and were not allowed to approach healthy people (Luke 17:12), let alone have physical contact with them. Their exclusion had an emphatic cultic aspect; according to Mosaic law, a leper was even to warn those he encountered by calling out: "Unclean! Unclean!" (Leviticus 13:45). But the Gospel now relates how Jesus voluntarily touches a leper (Matthew 8:3). A *dalit* theologian concludes: "That is definitely good news to the Dalits."[33]

The Gospel stories about Jesus and the Samaritans similarly appeal to the *dalits*—and rightly so. The Samaritans were excluded from Israel because of their impure descent which made them ritually unclean. They were not allowed to take part in the temple cult either. Jesus holds the Samaritans up as an example for his listeners a number of times (Luke 10:25-67; 17:11-19). This fact already is striking as far as the *dalits* are concerned, but what they find very special is the story of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:1-42). Here Jesus asks a Samaritan woman if she will draw some water for him. The *dalits* can imagine only too well why this surprises the woman: this question as to the person from whom one may accept water is still a very sensitive point today in the relationship between those of high and low caste. *Dalit* theologians regard

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[32] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 67; Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 415; Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, p. 59.

[33] Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, p. 68.

this act of Jesus as a crown witness for the thesis that he opposes untouchability.[34]

Jesus is a Revolutionary

There is an objection to equating the *dalits*' cause with the interests of those who were discriminated against in Jesus' time, such as lepers and Samaritans. Some *dalit* theologians have the tendency to place Jesus in opposition to his own people in a questionable way. They want to present Jesus as a revolutionary who leads the way in uncompromising resistance to social injustice and oppressive forms of religion. The Gospel does give occasion to link Jesus with working on behalf of the oppressed and excluded people. And, just like other liberation theologians, *dalit* theologians are right when they claim that little attention has been paid to this in church and theology.

But lepers and Samaritans cannot be equated with *dalits* in all respects and the orthodox Jews of Jesus' time cannot be identified with brahmans, however much one can point to similar characteristics. Arulraja, in particular, argues continally that Jesus takes up a position diametrically opposite to "the Jews" and rejects their entire tradition.[35] Jesus would have initially followed the Old Testament writings but, due to his growing experience in life as a labourer (!), would have increasingly begun to think for himself. Arulraja can thus do little with Jesus' statement that he had not come to abolish the Law or the Prophets but to fulfil them (Matthew 5:17). For Arulraja, this fulfilment then means that Jesus gives an entirely new direction to the Old Testament tradition: "Jesus preached revolutionary ideas going contrary to the dictates and interpretation of the Bible."[36] Here a narrow Marxist worldview emerges in combination with a misunderstanding of the Old Testament tradition that one sees more often in Roman Catholics writers in India. A better understanding for rooting Jesus in the Jewish prophetic

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[34] Prabhakar, "Christology in Dalit Perspective," p. 415; Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, pp. 58, 117; Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," p. 53.

[35] Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, particularly chapter VI.

[36] Arulraja, *Jesus the Dalit*, p. 96.

tradition of the Old Testament just might sharpen Jesus' revolutionary characteristics!

Jesus Belongs in the Village

A final aspect of the conception of Jesus in *dalit* theology is connected with the contrast between city and country. The heart of church life and the practice of theology in India usually lies in the urban environment. The city was the place where the Europeans had control. The educational institutions of the missions are to be found in the cities, and the city is in the foreground with regard to the development of society, as well as with regard to theological issues of inculturation and dialogue.

But for dalits—and to a greater degree for *adivasis*—life occurs in the villages. "Rural India is the heartland of casteism and the primary context of the dehumanisation that Dalits experience."[37] When *dalits* imagine Jesus, they prefer to see him on his travels through the countryside of Israel. And then a name comes up that at least in *dalit* theology has acquired a special meaning: Galilee.

The *dalits* recognize something in the region where, according to the gospels, Jesus began his preaching: "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matthew 4:15). Apparently, the inhabitants of the area were poorly thought of. And it is precisely there that the message of liberation sounds for the first time. *Dalit* theologians are devoted to the idea of portraying Jesus as the preacher in "the marginalized Galilee." They present themselves as his audience, as the rural people who are despised by the urban elite of Judea. Here they can rightly appeal to the Jewish custom of referring to the illiterate as "the *am-ha-arez*—the people of the land."[38]

In this way Jesus enters the private life of the *dalit*. Apparently he does not belong to the unknown and feared urban environment but is at home in the villages. In recent years especially this notion has become more significant. After a decade of militant *dalit* theology with its accent on socio-political change,

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[37] Athyal, "New Challenges for Dalit Theology," p. 21/26.

[38] M. Gnanavaram, "Eschatology In Dalit Perspective," in: Devasahayam, *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, p. 480.

a certain change in thinking could be observed around the year 2000. There is less thinking in terms of absolute conflicts of interests and more of a search for that where bridges can be constructed. And as far as the *dalits* are concerned, it is no longer only their history of suffering and oppression that is recalled but the values of their own subculture as well.

Village life seems to have something positive to offer as well from which the entire church in India can profit. This idea is also strongly supported by the new input from the tribal communities, which has become noticeable in theology in recent years.[39] The *adivasis* also have experience with neglect, contempt and oppression, but they want to contribute primarily positive elements for theological reflection from their specific cultural background. The connection with nature is central here, but the communal awareness that so qualifies life for *adivasis* also plays an important role. Furthermore, the biblical narratives are viewed in a distinct way from the perspective of their own religious background in which the world of the spirits is always near. And it is also important for the conception of Christ that the *adivasis* let their voice be heard.

When a new pope was inaugurated in 2005, a Jesuit father from India wrote an open letter. He pleaded in particular for the interests of the Christian *dalits* and *adivasis*. He explained how these sections of the population saw Jesus as one of them, someone who cried with them *and also danced with them*.[40] These words take us into the private lives of the villagers, especially those in the tribal areas. Here is where this most recent influence on theological issues is most clearly to be seen. The conception of Jesus in India continues to be filled in again and again in new ways.

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[39] Hecker, "Adivasi-Theologie."

[40] Francis Gonsalves, "Wilkommen, Welcome, Swagatham!" *National Catholic Reporter* 3 (2005): 5.

INTERMEZZO

Susheila Williams

Under the influence of *dalit* theology we see another representation of Jesus emerging in recent years. In addition to what has now become the traditional depiction of an exalted teacher of wisdom or a cosmic divine figure, we now see him in the villages, associated with the culture of the low-caste people. Jyoti Sahi, for instance, painted Christ in his later work as a dancer who impassions people with a large hand drum.

For me, one of the most forceful depictions of Jesus in village life is a painting of the crucifixion by Susheila Williams, an artist who has only recently become known in Christian India. She has a strong affinity for the culture of the village societies in South India. For many years she worked as a volunteer in organizing campaigns for social awareness, eliminating illiteracy, and health care in a dozen villages. Her professional background was in a different area: she studied English literature and, in addition, was trained as an interior designer. For twelve years she was the director of a centre for vocational training run by the Protestant Church of South India. At the moment she works as an interior designer while doing secretarial work for the Bishop Appasamy College of Arts and Sciences in Coimbatore, also an institution of the Church of South India.

In the area of art, Williams is known primarily for her large oil paintings, but this is not her only technique—she also makes terrocotta statues. Her paintings often have biblical themes, and the suffering of Christ is prominent here. The most well-known painting in her oeuvre is called *Thirty Silver Coins*, which depicts the bottom part of the cross with the feet of Jesus and, underneath them, the money bag with Judas' silver coins on the ground. This painting was awarded a prize as part of "Christian Communication through Art." Williams' work has been exhibited in several places in India, of course, but it is also sometimes shown outside of India. One of her paintings, *Girl Child*, was included in the travelling exhibition that was set up in Germany in 2006 by the Evangelisches Missionswerk in Süd-



westdeutschland (Protestant Mission Work in Southwest Germany).

The painting reproduced in this book is called *The Man on a Village Tree*. What is fascinating about this work is that the artist has connected the suffering of Christ with the life of the poor, low-caste villagers in the rural areas of India. The crucifixion is placed in a village in South India: we see the characteristic palm trees immediately. But it is also immediately clear that this is a poor village or the poor district of a village. The almost roughly sketched hut is the home of a *dalit* family. Such huts are found in the districts where the "untouchables" live, carefully separated from the centre of the village where high-caste Hindus have their sturdy homes built around the well.

Christ has apparently found his place among the despised *dalits*. This is where he suffers, of which the drops of blood on his arms—as so often in her work—are a symbol. It is very striking that Christ is not hanging on a cross but on a tree, thus depicting how fruitful his suffering is. His form, with his eyes closed, expresses calm and peace. He has almost become one with the tree: the distinction between his arms and the branches is blurred. The intense connectedness of the suffering Christ with the *dalits* is expressed in this way. And thus the painting is an expression of the same Gospel that the *dalit* theologians have brought to the foreground.

CHAPTER 11

Postscript

Hindus on Jesus

The first important contribution to the Indian conception of Jesus came from a Hindu. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Rammohan Roy studied Christ's teachings, published a book on them and became involved in a keen debate with Christian missionaries. He presented Jesus as a teacher of wisdom with a strong practical bent: in his teaching he refers to the way to peace and happiness in life. Jesus is a guru.

Rammohan Roy's influence was great. The new form of Hinduism that he propagated was of great influence throughout the whole of the nineteenth century among the metropolitan intelligentsia. The sympathetic approach to Jesus as a teacher of wisdom, like Eastern gurus, thus became generally accepted within these circles, which constituted, of course, merely a very small segment of the population.

Within other sectors of Hindu society interest in the figure of Jesus Christ arose as well. Shri Ramakrishna attempted to fathom the meaning of Christ through meditation. He saw in him the mystic who through methodical practice was able to realize the divine in his life. For him, the guru Jesus had become a yoga master. Ramakrishna passed on his respect for Jesus to his disciples. The movement that arose around him has always been characterized by a great respect for Jesus' spiritual path. Up until far into the twentieth century, monks of the Ramakrishna Mission have played an important role in the dialogue between Hindus and Christians. For them Christ is a divine incarnation, in line with the model of the Hindu *avatara*.

Whereas Ramakrishna and his followers were concerned with the mystic path of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi was more concerned with Jesus' moral teachings. Following in the footsteps of Rammohan Roy, he was fascinated in the first place by the Sermon on the Mount mostly because of its emphasis on non-violence. For Gandhi, it is essential that, as a guru, Jesus not only preached a certain ethic but also lived in accordance with his own principles to the very end. For that reason, Jesus'

suffering and dying acquired a special meaning for the Mahatma. However much the Gandhian movement was marked by Hindu values, the great importance of Jesus as a preacher of non-violence has always been undisputed.

Hindus have thus played an important role in many ways in the reflection on the meaning of Christ in the Indian context. But it is remarkable that in the past quarter of a century the voice of Hindus in the dialogue has grown silent. Both in religious schools and in more socially oriented movements, attention for the person of Jesus Christ is fading. And there is hardly any response when the ecclesiastical world in India calls on Hindus to continue the dialogue. Almost all of the Indian Christians who have applied themselves to the discussion with Hindus are disappointed by the lack of response. The conclusion by the Jesuit Ignatius Puthiadam, who had worked for the purpose of mutual understanding for many years, is typical: "Dialogue is mostly a Christian thing."[1]

Usually, the lack of interest in dialogue by Hindus is explained by their fundamental attitude that differences between religions can never be foundational. After all, there is only one divine truth. But a suspicion that always lies just beneath the surface certainly plays a role here: Is it not the need to convert others that ultimately drives Christians in their friendly dialogical approach?[2] This suspicion has been strengthened in recent decades because of a renewed self-consciousness among Hindus. Since the 1980s there has been a militant Hinduism on the rise, which is fighting both politically and religiously for *hindutva*, the ideal of an all-powerful Hinduism as the one religion of

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[1] In an interview with Charlotte Venema; see: C. Venema, *Living Apart Together: Inter-faith Dialogue in India* (Master's Thesis, Theology, University of Amsterdam, 1993), p. 27. In the 1970s Pater Puthiadam published a collection of Hindu texts for Christians to use when meditating: Ignatius Puthiadam, Martin Kämpchen, *Endlos ist die Zeit in Deinen Händen: Mit den Hindus beten* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker,1978). In 1980 he settled in Varanasi in order to live in dialogue with Hindus and Muslims on a grassroots level.

[2] See Richard W. Taylor, "Current Hindu-Christian Dialogue in India," in: H. Coward (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 123.

India. Christian missions are, of course, strongly opposed and initiatives for dialogue are met with great suspicion.

Publications on Jesus and Christianity still appear in these circles, but they can hardly be regarded as a contribution to dialogue. Typical is a publication by Ram Swarup (1920-1998), in which both Islam and Christianity are challenged strongly because of their claim to universal truth. Swarup says that Christian theology "derives from a mind prejudiced, self-centered and self-righteous, a mind contentious and cantankerous, out to prove the other fellow in the wrong."[3] In this corner of Hinduism there is absolutely no respect for the figure of Christ anymore. Sita Ram Goel (1921-2003), Ram Swarup's student, even enters a "plea for rejecting Jesus as junk."[4]

It is curious that both fundamentalist authors have a background in which interreligious dialogue has great value. Ram Swarup was active in the Gandhian movement, and he and one of the most famous Christian followers of the Mahatma, Madeleine Slade (alias Mirabehn), were close for a number of years. Sita Ram Goel was one of the Hindus who became involved in interreligious dialogue through the Christian ashrams. He was the treasurer of the Abhishiktananda Society for many years but finally broke with the Christian swami because of the latter's "obstinate obsession with Jesus and the Church."[5] It is certainly not the case that this combating of the Christian faith is common in the Gandhian movement or among the Hindus around the Christian ashrams. But it is remarkable that such ideas are expressed where shared reflection on the message of Christ used to be so important. And it is significant that scarcely anything else is heard from the Hindus. The great contribution by Hindus in the discussion on the "Indian Jesus" has apparently become something of the past.

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[3] Ram Swarup, Hinduism vis-à-vis Christianity and Islam, 3rd ed. (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1992), p. 63.

[4] Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers?* 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1994), ch. 22.

[5] Goel, *Catholic Ashrams*, p. 64.

Christians on Jesus

Rammohan Roy's description of Jesus as an Eastern guru and claim that he was a fellow Asian did not meet with any approval among Christians in India at that time. However much the Western missionaries had done to understand the culture in which they had ended up, their faith remained Western. And the new Christians in India became acquainted with Jesus as a European figure, who had no connection at all with their own cultural background.

But in the second half of the nineteenth century some Indian Christians gradually began to reflect on the relationship between Christ and the Eastern religious world. Two Christians who knew the Hindu culture very well were the instigators of this development and both had bore the title of *pandit*: Nehemiah Goreh and Ramabai. But both were strongly influenced by Western theology and spirituality and, consequently, were extremely frightened of including "heathen" elements in their Christology. And yet both, each in his and her own way, paved the way for an actual inculturation of the Christian faith that would be increasingly better realized after them.

Nehemiah Goreh agreed with Rammohan Roy that Jesus was an Asian and thus could never really be strange to the Asians. He was also the first to argue that the Hindu *bhakti* tradition was fertile ground for the message of the Gospel. If Goreh was the first Indian systematic theologian, Pandita Ramabai was the first practical theologian. Her commitment to oppressed girls and women demonstrated how she understood Christ to be the liberator of the least of society. And her cautious attempts to develop an Indian liturgy and spirituality showed how the Christian faith was slowly finding its feet in another culture.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that the actual inculturation began. Theologians from the "Rethinking Christianity" group in Madras played a prominent role here. Chakkarai in particular offered a penetrating theology, founded entirely on the framework of Hindu concepts. He thus presented the Christian faith to his fellow countrymen in a terminology that was familiar to them. Jesus Christ became an *avatara*, a divine descent, similar to numerous figures in Hindu mythology—Krishna and Rama in particular.

The first Christian ashrams were founded during the same period. Over time, these little communities centred around a master would have a great influence on the formation of an Indian Christianity. The lifestyle and religious praxis in the ashrams were modelled entirely on Hindu examples. The centres were also very interested in art. For the first time, Christian sacred buildings were designed in a Hindu style. And painters who were looking for an Indian form for Christian works of art received a warm welcome in the ashrams.

Jesus was understandably depicted in the ashram movement as a homeless person. The ashram inhabitants, who themselves had turned away from a normal life in society, saw a great deal in their guru Jesus' renunciation of the world. For them, he was a *sadhu*, a wandering holy man who consciously rejects any place in ordered society. In the oldest ashrams, all of which have a Protestant background, this conception of Christ is also very compatible with the notion of social work that was also a goal for the inhabitants of the ashram. After all, Christ could devote himself to others because, as a homeless person, he was not bound by any social strictures.

The spirituality in the Protestant ashrams was strongly marked by the *bhakti* tradition of Hinduism. The inhabitants of Christian ashrams recognized a great deal in the loving devotion to the divine as expressed by many *bhaktas* throughout history in their poetry and music,. Thus the language and devotional attitude was found by which Christ could be addressed in an Indian way. In this form of spirituality, Christ grows far beyond the historical Jesus. He is the "eternal Christ" who will always and everywhere manifest himself where people discover something of the divine truth.

This depiction of a universal Christ emerges even more strongly in the later Roman Catholic ashrams. Mystic moments in particular are singled out in the life of Jesus. His statement, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30), was given central significance. The mystic experience behind these words is equated with the "realization of unity" in line with the monistic model. After all, the goal of the Hindus of the *advaita vedanta* school has always been to experience the ultimate unity of their own essence with that of the supreme Reality. Jesus Christ is thus first

and foremost a *jivanmukta*, a mystic who had achieved redemption already during his lifetime.

Subsequently, from the perspective of this way of thinking, one can speak of Christ in a most exalted way. He becomes a cosmic figure, who in a certain way becomes the face of the supreme Reality. Thus Christ can be referred to as the Consciousness (*Cit*) in the All (*Sachidananda*), which gives the divinity of Christ an all-encompassing emphasis. Historically, there is still some influence here from the centuries-old tradition of the Thomas Christians who where involved in one of the ashrams. Their Eastern Orthodox liturgy is strongly marked by the monophysitism that emphasizes that which is divine in Christ.

The mystical orientation to Christ that is experienced in the ashrams has been reflected upon theologically by a number of academic theologians in India. Raimundo Panikkar has attempted to explain in the most profound way how a meeting place for Hindus and Christians can be found in Christ. He, too, is concerned with a "cosmic Christ." In a Hindu context, this divine figure can be described as the personal side of the All, the Brahman. In this way Hindu philosophy and Christian faith are linked, for it would be unthinkable that Christ, as a central figure, would have nothing to do with both.

For other major theologians in the second half of the twentieth century as well, everything centres on the position of Christ in the world of the religions, of which Hinduism, quite obviously, is paradigmatic. M.M. Thomas and Stanley Samartha in particular have made important contributions to the development of an Indian Christology and also point to the presence of Christ in Hinduism. But other than in Panikkar, they are not concerned with an ontological, suprahistorical reality. Thomas sees the activity of Christ in the development of Hinduism in the colonial period: the effect of the Gospel can be seen in the activity of the Hindu reformers. Christ is actively present in India's religion. Samartha also searches for the relevance of Christ for Hindus. From a strong preference for the monistic *advaita*, he outlines the cosmic Christ as the all-encompassing figure in whom all of humanity is included. Such an approach allows no room for rivalling religious schools: Hinduism and Christianity belong together in Christ. Later, however, Samartha reconsid-

ered the view of the cosmic Christ who links religions together; ultimately, he saw this as too much of an exclusive claim to truth on the part of Christians. What remains is the collective orientation of Hindus and Christians to God, whereby Christ has a normative meaning only for Christians.

In the 1980s it seemed that a certain consensus had developed regarding Christology in India. The image of the cosmic Christ was the most suitable for inspiring both Hindus and Christians. Inculturation had led to a very elevated Christ figure: as an *avatara* or as a personal aspect of the Brahman, Christ had found his place in India. It seemed that all that could be said about Christ had been said.

Classic brahman thinking was continually viewed as the obvious source for providing the framework for Christology. In the 1980s this obviousness and the leading theology changed radically in form within a short time. The churches in India increasingly felt the need to join the majority of the population that was outside the brahman culture, and in particular the lowest layer in the caste society – the *dalits*. With the rise of a new self-consciousness among the *dalits*, Christian or not, a new theological view of Christ also developed.

The new image of Jesus stood diametrically opposed to the highly elevated "cosmic Christ." He was the companion of the poor and oppressed, the revolutionary who broke through social boundaries. Great interest in the historical Jesus, the "earthly Jesus," can be observed among the new *dalit* theologians. His attitude toward Jewish purification rituals and his association with Samaritans and other victims of discrimination acquired a normative meaning. He is still a guru, but he is now one who teaches people reform and change. Such a Jesus finds his place in India not in the holy temples but in the huts of the poor. And the most recent development of *adivasi* theology adds to this: he is at home in the villages, at one with the people in their joy and in their suffering.

Academic theology and ecclesiastical policy no longer set the tone for everything. For many people, both Hindu and Christian, Christ will always have the characteristics of the divine on earth, the *avatara*, or, at any rate, the classic guru, the master of wisdom and mysticism. We find expressions of this in visual art. Painters portray him according to Hindu iconology.

As a child, he resembles the playful Krishna and, as a teacher, he does not differ much from the average wandering guru. At times he is given the elevated characteristics of Buddha and as the Risen Lord he is a deity among the gods. In any event, Christ is at home in the pantheon of India.

This is particularly striking in popular culture. In the very popular posters and calendar pictures sold in bazaars and at the temples, we invariably find illustrations of Christ next to the usual prints of Rama and Krishna, Hanuman and Shiva. The comic books with stories from Hindu mythology are especially loved by children in India, and in the immensely popular series "Amar Chitra Katha," we find, in addition to the comic stories about the *avataras* and *bhaktas*, a volume devoted to Jesus Christ, which just like the others has undergone many reprints.[6] In India three feature films were also made on the life of Jesus, following the example of the popular pageant films on mythology.

Although the accent in these artistic expressions lies on the divinity of Christ, nevertheless in the past years some influence of the new theology can be observed. Jesus is more often typified as a supporter of the *dalits*; we also see him in a clear village situation, sometimes even in the setting of a tribal culture.[7] Nor is the latest movie about Jesus, from 2004, disconnected from the shift in the image of Jesus in the new theology of the *dalits*.[8] And thus inculturation continues: new theological insights and social movements adjust the image of Christ in India. And this, perhaps, is the best proof of the relevance of Christ in Indian society and culture.

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[6] Drakshathota Aruliah and Pratap Mulick, *Jesus Christ*, Amar Chitra Katha, Special Issue, No. 3 (Bombay: India Book House Education Trust, s.a.).

[7] In the later work of Jyoti Sahi and Susheila Williams there is a stronger orientation towards village culture (see intermezzos 4 and 5). The situation of the *dalits* is depicted clearly in the paintings by Solomon Raj; see Jojanneke Dekker, *Solomon Raj, Prophetic Artist in India: A Research on Dr. P. Solomon Raj's Art as a Medium of Inculturation of the Gospel in India* (Master's Thesis Theology, Utrecht University, 2006).

[8] Freek L. Bakker, "Shanti Sandesham: A New Jesus Film Produced in India. Indian Christology in Pictures," *Exchange* 36 (2007): 41-64.

Jesus as Guru

India has contributed a great deal to enriching the image of Jesus Christ. The impressive religious inheritance of Hinduism can serve to illuminate Christ in a new way. It appears to be possible to speak of what Christ means in a way different from the usual way of speaking about him in the West. After all, Christology has not been an exclusive European enterprise for quite some time now. Western theologians are still not always open to this—a very distressing example of this can be seen in the Christological study by H.M. Kuitert in 1998. The seriously scaled-down image of Christ that is introduced here is based entirely on Western secularized thinking. Not inappropriately, the book's cover shows a map of Europe!

India's contribution to Christology could have extra meaning for church and theology in the West. It is in India that the religions are marked by a long history in which mystical experience and philosophical reflection has been richly developed. It would certainly be worth it to discuss the figure of Jesus Christ from the perspective of this extraordinary background. In antiquity, it was Greek philosophy that provided the material for clarifying the meaning of Christ, and Christology was further developed over time in Europe on this foundation. In our time there has, on the one hand, been much more emphasis on the typically Jewish background of the Gospel, whereas, on the other, the Asian, African and Latin American cultures, each in its own way, are giving their own content to the image of Christ. Christology is slowly becoming something that belongs to the entire world, something to which all cultures and religions contribute.

As far as India is concerned, both Hindus and Christians participated in the formation of an image of Christ in the context of their own culture. The Hindu contribution must certainly not be thought of as slight. Sharpe's assertion that "no Hindu has ever produced an interpretation of Jesus Christ that has ever appealed in the slightest to Christians in the geographical West"[9] is entirely incorrect. Gandhi is already an example to the contrary: his view of Jesus as the "Prince of all passive resisters"

[9] Eric J. Sharpe, "Neo-Hindu Images of Christianity," in: A. Sharma (ed.), *Neo-Hindu Views of Christianity* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), p. 15.

has had an astounding influence on Christians in Europe and North America. Moreover, many Christian theologians in India have continued to build on the insights of Hindus on Jesus.

The unique feature of the Indian approach could be characterized by some terms derived from Hinduism. For Hindus and Christians alike, Jesus is, in the first place, a guru in the tradition of the Indian teachers. No other concept in the Hindu world has appealed to so many as a fitting characterization of Christ. The renowned missionary Roberto de Nobili used the term guru to refer to Jesus already in the seventeenth century,[10] and so did many missionaries who followed his example. But Hindus also sometimes saw Jesus Christ as a guru in line with their own tradition. In the early nineteenth century, Raja Rammohan Roy urgently called the attention of his fellow countrymen to Jesus Christ's teachings. He presented Jesus as a guru and also emphasized that Jesus was Asian. The notion that Jesus' activities as a teacher fit within the framework of the Eastern tradition has since then become widely accepted among Hindus and also among Christians in India. Neufeldt rightly concludes: "Jesus as Oriental or Hindu in his teaching is a notion that is maintained, if not explicitly, at least implicitly."[11]

What does it now mean if people in India call Jesus a guru? They pay careful attention, of course, to his teachings. A guru speaks words of wisdom, in a philosophical or mystical sense, or with respect to practical life and deserves to be listened to. But this does not exhaust the meaning of the word guru. The term always seems to reflect something of a divine presence. Not only do the words of a guru refer to God, but a guru is himself per definition through being a guru a personification of the divine. That is why, according to the ancient wisdom books, one must pay divine honour to a guru. And in India today the guru is still very much revered by anyone in his proximity.

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[10] Bror Tiliander, *Christian and Hindu Terminology: A Study in Their Mutual Relations with Special Reference to the Tamil Area*, Skrifter utgivna av Religionshistoriska Institutionen i Uppsala (Faculty of Humanities), 12 (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1974), p. 107.

[11] Ronald Neufeldt, "Hindu Views of Christ," in: H. Coward (ed.), *Hindu-Christian Dialogue: Perspectives and Encounters* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990) , p. 173.

Thus, a guru is more than a teacher in the usual sense of the word. He not only passes on knowledge but embodies that knowledge himself as well. Doctrine and life are linked very closely. He does not present any theses for academic discussion. He does not stand alongside his students in order to seek out the truth with them. On the contrary, he teaches with absolute authority. He has appropriated the mystic insight about which he speaks. And the way in which he travels the pathway of life is in complete agreement with his message. That is why his followers can entrust themselves to him without any hesitation. Thus, in Hinduism, the relationship between a guru and his students is of a particularly intense nature.[12] It is precisely this special relationship that makes the concept of "guru" useful in Christology, as Thomas Thangaraj argued extensively. Starting with the tradition of the Shaiva Siddhanta he shows how the guru represented God in the eyes of the student. In that way Christ could also be presented as the one who represented God to his disciples: "He is a human being; yet the disciples see him functioning as God to them in what he does and teaches."[13]

In order to indicate the guru's special importance, he is given the highest of titles. It is usual to refer to him by the term *gurudeva*, divine guru. When Hindus and Christians want to stress the great significance of Jesus Christ as guru, they also use this type of terminology. Roberto de Nobili called Jesus the *sadguru*, that is: the true teacher. It is an exalted designation: some *bhakti* schools use this word to address the one God.[14] Jack Winslow, the founder of the Christian ashram in Pune, preferred to use the term *jagadguru*, world teacher, for Jesus. This title is used for the most influential teachers in Hinduism; when used of Jesus, it stresses his global importance. Such terms emphasize what belongs inextricably to a guru: that he is a divine figure and is therefore completely trustworthy.

[12] See Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 346-54.

[13] M. Thomas Thangaraj, *The Crucified Guru: An Experiment in Cross-Cultural Christology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 94.

[14] In Kabir, for example; see Jan Peter Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten: Mystiek uit India voor westerse lezers* (Baarn: Ten Have, 1996), pp. 107-11.

But opinions can easily differ as to what the most important aspect of the teaching is that such a teacher gives. This is also the case with the guru Jesus. For Gandhi, all emphasis lay on the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus Christ taught people to stand up for truth and justice in a completely non-violent way. In contrast, for Shri Ramakrishna, the importance of Jesus' teaching lay in the area of mysticism: he taught the people how to achieve unity with God. But for both, the most convincing aspect of Jesus as guru was that he practised what he preached.

Christians in India have also demonstrated extremely varying emphases concerning Jesus' teachings. For Nehemiah Goreh and Pandita Ramabai the message of reconciliation and eternal salvation was most important. But for *dalit* theologians, it is the social emancipation and liberation from oppression. Nonetheless, it obtains for all that Jesus was a guru because he practised what he preached. He was what he said others should be.

It is striking that it is Jesus Christ's teaching that proved inspiring to so many people, however different their backgrounds and the directions they followed were. Within the broader context of interreligious dialogue as well, it can be stated that it is Jesus's role as teacher that evokes recognition among adherents of very different religious schools. However different opinions may be with regard to his divine origin or the meaning of his suffering, many still want to heed his instruction.[15]

When Jesus is called a guru, what he said to his followers and the people are primary. But directly connected to that is his way of life and his association with God and people. In that way his voice carries divine authority. The concept of guru, originally Hindu, is outstandingly suited to illuminating these aspects of the image of Christ.

The Guru as Reformer

Gurus can have very different positions in Hindu culture with respect to social issues. There are gurus who are solely interested in personal spiritual growth and mystical experience: they avoid social questions and, consequently, in a certain sense tend

[15] See also: Jan Peter Schouten, *Wie zeggen de mensen dat Ik ben? Jezus Christus in de dialoog*, Oecumenische bezinning 27 (Amersfoort: Raad van Kerken in Nederland, 2004), pp. 8-10.

to preserve the status quo. There are also gurus who explicitly emphasize the classic values of Hindu culture and, for example, defend the unequal position of people within the caste system. But the opposite also occurs.

In the *bhakti* movements in particular we find gurus who introduce alternative social ethics. In many of these movements the traditional brahman priestly cult is relativized. It is not the proper sacrifices and observance of caste rules that bring an individual further spiritually but rather one's personal loving devotion to God. If this religious attitude is prominent, it can no longer be meaningful to make a distinction between people on the basis of birth. In any case, for the *bhaktas* themselves the differences in status no longer apply, for these devotees share the intense veneration of the same divinity and, because of that, feel connected with one another across traditional boundaries.[16]

The gurus in these movements thus also regularly defend far-reaching reforms in society. It can be the question of an equal position for men and women, the abolition or at least a strong qualification of the caste hierarchy, social and religious rights for the so-called untouchables and such. There are remarkable examples of such emancipatory movements from the far past, such as that of Basava (12th century) or the circles inspired by Kabir (15th century). But in modern Hinduism as well the call to loving devotion is often joined with the resistance to the rigid preservation of traditional social inequality.

It was thus not at all surprising to Hindus as such that Jesus' preaching also had social implications. The radicality of the morality in the Gospel did often have a shock effect. This guru seemed to want to break through all social boundaries. In the closed Hindu society of the early nineteenth century in particular, certain aspects of Jesus' preaching were experienced as being very extreme—the view that all people were equal before God was going quite far.

Nevertheless, Christian missionaries in general did not tone down the radical nature of the Gospel, and Hindu reformers could take advantage of this. Thus Rammohan Roy could become the ally of the Baptist missionaries in the protests

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[16] For the *bhakti* movements see Jan Peter Schouten, *Bhakti: Spiritualiteit in het hindoeïsme*, Wegwijs (Kampen: Kok, 2005) and Schouten, *Goddelijke vergezichten*.

against the burning of widows, and a century later Mahatma Gandhi would be inspired by the non-violence he found in the Sermon on the Mount.

Christian theologians in India as well, for whom other aspects of the proclamation were more central, felt addressed by the social ideals of the Gospel. For Nehemiah Goreh and Pandita Ramabai, the message of redemption was primary in the area of spirituality: eternal blessedness was attainable through Christ's sacrificial death. But both crossed social boundaries in imitation of Jesus' example. Goreh worked as a brahman among the untouchables and Ramabai fought forcefully against the discrimination against widows.

We also see a combination of religious and social ideals in the first phase of the ashram movement. That Jesus Christ was a guru in the Protestant ashrams did not mean only loving devotion to him in the spirituality of the life of the community. It also moved the members of the ashram to active service for the sick and vulnerable in society.

Finally, of course, in the more recent *dalit* theology, the image of Jesus as the social reformer was given complete emphasis. In the Gospel stories the "untouchables" saw primarily Jesus' overtures to the victims of discrimination of that time: the Samaritans, the poor and oppressed, and the lepers. If Jesus is a guru for *dalits*, then, as guru, he must first be a reformer. That Jesus Christ is given a central meaning for people in this way is valuable not only in the Indian context—it could also open the eyes of Western Christians to the great transformative power that people can experience in the Gospel of Jesus.

Jesus as Yogi

Hindus and Christians who choose a monastic way of life are interested primarily in certain aspects of Jesus' life. They feel called in particular by Jesus' path of spiritual development. The stories that tell how Jesus withdrew for reflection and prayer in the desert or mountains is given special significance by them. And everything that refers to the mystical unity between Jesus and his heavenly father is primary for them.

It is remarkable that this obtains both for Hindu monks as well as for members of Christian ashrams. Swami Vivekananda expressed no reservation in presenting Jesus as a *sannyasi*, an

ascetic who withdrew from the world in order to achieve the highest unity with God. But also Jesudason, the founder of the first Protestant ashram, sees Jesus as a *sadhu* who deliberately chooses against having a normal family life in society. And he cites the same text that was decisive for Vivekananda in this context: "[T]he Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Roman Catholic monks like Jules Monchanin and Henri le Saux elaborate on this idea in an even more radical way. They hold that the Hindu *sannyasi* is the most appropriate figure with whom Jesus Christ can be compared in the Indian context. They see his path as the most absolute form of renunciation of the world.

It is certainly valuable to have an eye for the way in which Jesus related to society. As an itinerant teacher, he did not allow himself to be encapsulated in any particular group but kept a critical distance from society. In that respect, he can indeed be compared with an itinerant *sadhu* in Hindu India. Some qualification is needed here, however. The reasoning is not valid on the point of asceticism and world renunciation. In the gospels the most prominent example of an ascetic is not Jesus but John the Baptist, of whom it is said that "he did not eat bread or drink any wine," whereas it was said of Jesus precisely that "the Son of Man has come, eating and drinking"(Luke 7:33-34).

The comparison between Jesus and the Hindu *sadhu* is stronger in another respect. Via this comparison, Hindus and Christians often want to direct attention to Jesus' spirituality. He is thus presented as a *yogi*, for example. In this context reference is made to what has been passed on in the gospels concerning Jesus' prayer life. The fact that he sometimes spent the night in prayer on a mountain reminds the Indian of the very lengthy meditation exercises of a *yogi*, also often done in a mountainous area. And the texts from the gospel according to John, in which Jesus speaks about his unity with the Father, are most likely associated with a high form of mystical transport that a *yogi* can experience.

Thus, already in Shri Ramakrishna we find the conviction that Jesus is an expert in yoga—he is a yoga master. And succeeding generations of monks in this tradition have repeated this: Jesus was a *yogi* who ascended through spiritual exercises until he participated in the highest enlightenment. But some

Christian theologians also see Jesus as a *yogi*. Chakkarai writes with great respect and enthusiasm about Jesus' prayer life behind which he sees the spirit of a *yogi*. In the Roman Catholic ashrams a connection is often made between Jesus' spiritual life and yoga. He is seen, for example, as a *jivanmukta*, a holy man who has already, in his lifetime, reached the highest level of consciousness through great mystical exercises.

Justice is not always carefully done to the evident differences that exist between prayer as Jesus practised it and Hindu yoga. The yoga of the monistic tradition, directed as it is towards the realization of the complete unity between the human being and the All, cannot be placed straightforwardly on a par with values in the Gospel, not even with those in John's gospel. Nevertheless, those who call Jesus a *yogi* do have a point: they direct attention to something that has been grossly undervalued in Western theology, i.e. the mystical connection that Jesus experienced with the Father during his life. But it is in line with Hindu awareness to pay attention precisely to these aspects of Jesus' life. Thus biblical stories and statements by Jesus are seen in a new light. In the footsteps of Jesus, systematic and intense contact with God can receive all attention.

Jesus as Avatara

The characterization of Jesus that speaks the most to the imagination is, without a doubt, *avatara*. This connects Jesus to a number of very revered divine figures in Hinduism. The use of such a loaded term immediately raises the question as to whether this term emphasizes Jesus Christ's uniqueness or causes it to disappear entirely in the multiformity of the Hindu pantheon.

The word *avatara* literally means "descent" and is the fixed term for an appearance of a divinity in human form. We should keep in mind that not all Hindus attach the same content and value to an *avatara*. In the Shiva cult, the concept of *avatara* plays only a subordinate role. There are mythological stories in which Shiva appears in human form, but such appearances are always short and fleeting. Any comparison to Jesus' life is less obvious here.

In Vaishnavism, however, we do find extensive myths on the coming of God to earth, around which an elaborate theo-

logy has even developed. According to the most common systematization, there are ten *avataras* of Vishnu. The first few of these are not suitable either for casting light on the incarnation in Jesus Christ. These are fanciful representations of a mythical primal time, in which Vishnu appears on earth in the form of, for example, a giant turtle or wild boar. But among the later *avataras* we do find the famous figures who are central to the religious experience of many Hindus: Rama and Krishna.

If Hindus and Indian Christians call Jesus an *avatara*, they then usually associate him with these two appearances by Vishnu. Gautama Buddha can possibly be added here, because he is also viewed by most Vaishnavas as one of Vishnu's *avataras*. For most Hindus, it is easy to include Jesus. Just like the others, he was born of an ordinary human mother. There are stories about his whole life, from his youth to maturity. From his work and teaching it was apparent that he came to earth with a mission. And he is also recognized by the people as a divine figure.

The system in which the myths about Vishnu's *avataras* have been worked out theologically is based on the Bhagavad-Gita. The key text is: "'For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evildoers, for the setting up of the law of righteousness I come into being age after age" (Bhagavad-Gita 4:8).[17] It thus concerns a periodical appearance of God on earth, and what Krishna says here obtains for all *avataras*: the purpose is to fight evil and restore justice and harmony. The idea behind this is the involvement of God with people: he descends to earth out of mercy in order to intervene before humankind is destroyed.

Many modern Hindus believe that Jesus Christ was also an *avatara* of this kind, similar to Rama and Krishna. In the studies on Christ by Hindus—for example by the monks Akhilananda and Prabhavananda of the Ramakrishna Mission—this has been worked out extensively. But it is also apparent from popular religiosity how Jesus has received a place in this way in the Hindu pantheon: he is depicted on many bazar prints as standing together with many other *avataras*.

Christians saw the importance of the *avatara* concept quite early, when they were attempting to explain their religion to Hindus. The seventeenth-century missionary Roberto de Nobili

[17] R.C. Zaehner (ed., transl.), *The Bhagavad-Gita* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 184.

was the first to use the term *avatara* to refer to Christ.[18] His opinion was that, although there were important differences from the appearances of Vishnu on earth, there was simply no other concept available in Hinduism for referring to Christ as the incarnation of God. This ambivalent attitude is also found in later Christian theologians. The word *avatara* presents itself as a term for describing Christ in relation to God but also includes its own content, which is not always seen as suitable.

Even a very orthodox theologian like Nehemiah Goreh saw an overlapping of the *avatara* concept with the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. He was shocked by the erotic scenes in Krishna's life, but the fundamental idea that Vishnu relinquished his glory in order to save people seemed to him to be in complete agreement with Christian theology. Chakkarai even made the *avatara* concept central to his Christology. But the god's periodical appearance on earth in the theological system of the Vaishnavas remained a stumbling block. For Christian theologians, this is at odds with the notion of the uniqueness of Christ. The solution is to call Christ the only *avatara* (Appasamy), the abiding *avatara* (Chakkarai) or the historical *avatara* (Griffiths). Only Samartha had no difficulty with the term in his last period of theologizing: Christ was given a place as one of the *avataras*, in which case all claims to universal truth are dropped.

But what all those who call Jesus an *avatara* have in common is a renewed understanding of his divinity. This is also the outstanding contribution of Indian thinking to Christology. Hinduism is pervaded with respect and surprise at the divine reality. If Jesus Christ is described by concepts from the Hindu world, then the divine presence will also be heavily accented. This certainly obtains for the concept of *avatara*. While there has been a quest for the historical Jesus for the last two centuries in the West, in the Indian understanding Jesus is primarily a divine appearance.

The myths about Rama and Krishna give further content to the appearance of the divinity. If Jesus Christ is an *avatara*, he will also have something in common with the other *avataras*. Is there then something in him of the artistic and the erotic that plays such a great role in the cultus of Krishna? And is there al-

[18] Tiliander, *Christian and Hindu Terminology*, pp. 95-96.

so something in him to be seen of the strict feeling for justice and the ideal of a perfect human society as continually found in Rama? These questions from an Indian context could bring new emphases in the West regarding the image of Christ. And, on the other hand, Christians in the West and East will certainly enrich the *avatara* concept by continuing to point to what is unique in God's appearance in Christ: that he even suffered and died for the sake of humankind.[19]

When Jesus is described as a guru, then it is his teachings that are of primary concern; when he is described as *avatara*, then what he did is the focus. In his involvement with people, helping and healing them, he shows nothing less than God's love. Or rather: he is God's love. Using the *avatara* concept as the background means fashioning an image of Christ in which God comes as close as possible to the human being. This concept has rightly received a fixed place in reflection on Christ in India.

The Cosmic Christ

It can always be larger. Indian culture is inclined in its mythology to make the largest contexts of all. History occurs very quickly in frameworks of aeons and religious figures are blown up to cosmic proportions. This inclination is also detectable in Christian theology in India—and precisely in Christology a surprising image arises.

Chakkarai describes Jesus Christ as, among other things, the prototype of the human being: Christ is the model for being human. In that context he uses the old Vedic terminology, in which the mythological Purusha, the primal form of human life, is central. Thus, Christ can be can be called the *Sat Purusha*, the true human being. Later theologians have elaborated on this notion. Bede Griffiths in particular was fascinated by the idea of a cosmic primal human being, such as is found—according to him—in many cultures. He does still hold to the history of Jesus Christ on earth, but he sees much more in Christ than the human being Jesus—he sees the representative of humankind, the Human Being. And this cosmic Human Being is then the per-

[19] Cassian R. Agera, "A Wounded Divinity: An Indian Perspective on Christ," *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 4 (1994): 117-32.

ceptible side of God. Griffiths links up here with the famous hymn in the letter to the Colossians, where it is said of Christ:

> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)

It is not surprising that this image of Christ is made central precisely by a theologian in the ashram movement. The experiential world of the Christian ashrams, so closely connected with the Hindu culture, required very much all-encompassing conceptions that did not exclude other religions. And practising meditation made them sensitive to the highest and largest representations. Already in the older Protestant ashrams people spoke preferably of the eternal Christ who revealed himself in all the religious searching by people. This line was continued in the later Roman Catholic ashrams. Christ becomes a term for the side of God that is turned towards the earth.

Even the most comprehensive concepts in Hinduism are brought into connection with Christ. Both Panikkar and Samartha attempted to outline a Christology with the monistic approach, the *advaita*, as their starting point. And Henri le Saux also tried to ascribe a place to Christ from this background. The reflections on the unity of all that exists seems to leave little room for a teaching about Christ. Nevertheless, they all, each in their own way, succeed in developing an image of Christ within this framework. However much the result differs, the starting point is always that Christ is a way of expressing the highest Reality. And thus he becomes an all-encompassing figure, in whom all that exists is included.

The image of the cosmic Christ gained a certain popularity during the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1961 in New Delhi. But twenty-five years later a major shift in theology began in India. Through the rise of *dalit* theology, attention shifted to the historical Jesus and the position he chose in society. Interest in conceptions such as the cosmic Christ died. It is certainly not without good reason that the image of Christ thus came "down to earth" again. Nevertheless, the high concep-

tions of an all-encompassing image of Christ from the previous period did raise questions that have not lost their relevance. Did Western theology not too easily cast off the cosmic view of Christ—which also, apparently, inspired the first Christians? And can the wisdom and spirituality of Hinduism also not teach us to think "more largely" about Christ?

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